

Naruto: Vermillion Thunder

by Chuckling-Ghost

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Summary: An AU where Naruto says what needs to be said and knows what needs to be known. He is every bit as wily as the fox whose power he draws upon when things get tough. Jiraiya's been around upholding his duties and Naruto has benefited appropriately. I've taken considerable liberties with the world at large, so the geography, politics & etc are new and I think rather original. Enjoy.

## 1. Chapter 1: Naruto Uzumaki

=Chapter 1: Naruto Uzumaki=

==15 Years After the 9 Tailed Fox's Attack==

Naruto cheerfully clambered about the Hokage monument, using his claws and a series of safety lines to keep himself from falling to a very early death as a fluffy orange tail waved in the air behind him holding his spare paint bucket. He grinned as he heard people shouting at him from down below. He didn't much care. SPLOOSH went the yellow paint over the hair of his father's stone semblance. Naruto checked to make sure he had gotten most of the former Hokage's hair and then clambered back up and switched for buckets of blue and white paint before clambering back down to his dad's eyes and quickly painting them as well.

It was definitely the most polite of his work today. Lord First Hokage had lipstick and makeup on to go with his long hair. Lord Second had a long curly mustache and his tongue sticking out with his eyes crossed and a rather stupid grin, and Lord Third looked very drunk. ''\_Ah speak of the devil,\_'' Naruto thought as he turned in his harness and saw Lord Third walking up. Naruto sighed and clambered back up to set his bucket of paint down, and get where he could run, he added as he glanced over his shoulder and saw his teacher Iruka-sensei running up.

As Iruka-sensei tensed to spring, Naruto loosed his safety lines,

knowing that if he kept them secured Iruka would have him hog tied in an instant. Iruka sprung up, Naruto sprung down, "WHOOOOO!" Iruka landed on the monument, hanging like a lizard, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Naruto hurled a kunai trailing one of his lines into a nearby building, and as it lodged in the wall he twisted, spinning himself through the air onto the side of the building, latching on with his claws and stopping what would otherwise have most likely been a lethal descent.

He pulled his line loose and bounced across the street off a building and back down before waving at Iruka-sensei and yelling up at him, "High Altitude Maneuvering Practice Sensei!" Then he bounded away as two chunin leapt down to the street to chase him. As he rounded a corner at top speed he dove into a dumpster and hid as the two chunin shot past, "Where did he go?!"

Naruto grinned and transformed into a small ordinary fox and waited. He listened with his fox senses as the two chunin moved on, carefully paying attention for the pop of a shadow clone being made. When the coast was clear, he slunk out of the dumpster and scurried off to Ichiraku's. Before he got there he transformed again, this time into a pretty girl with dark hair in nondescript clothing. He slunk in and ordered six bowls to go, making sure to barely acknowledge Iruka-sensei as he poked his head in looking for him.

"Hey have you seen Naruto?" He asked Teuchi. "Nope," Teuchi replied. Naruto hmmmed thoughtfully, "you mean that blonde kid with the tail?" Iruka turned to Naruto immediately, "Yes that's him!" Naruto cheerfully pointed away from the school, "I think I saw him going that way."

Iruka bowed, "Thank you miss!" and ran off. Teuchi handed Naruto his ramen, "Here you go." "Thank you!" Naruto replied happily before walking off calmly. He didn't run, but he didn't let any grass grow under his feet either. He hummed cheerfully, everything good here, nothing wrong. He passed the two chunin that had chased him and got back to the school in a matter of minutes.

He slunk around to the classroom window and poked his eyes over the bottom of the window sill to make sure he had indeed beaten Iruka back. He grinned as he didn't see him and quickly climbed in. "I'm back!" He declared happily. He quickly returned to his seat and after quickly kissing Hinata on the cheek and placing a bowl of ramen in front of her, earning himself a huge smile and shy blush that made his heart soar, he looked around, "Choji!" Choji grinned as he accepted his bowl of ramen, "Thanks Naruto!" "Shikamaru!" Shikamaru sighed as he accepted his, "You know Iruka-sensei's gonna be furious when he gets back right?" Naruto grinned, "He'll get over it."

"WILL HE NOW?!" Iruka bellowed as he dropped the camouflage cloth right behind Naruto. Naruto jumped clear across the room, a bowl of ramen still in hand as he landed on Iruka's desk. He recovered quickly, turned, crossed his legs and sat down on Iruka's desk, "Well that last bowl's for you. I kinda figure you'll get over it but..." he shrugged, "The monument needed painting anyway, it's supposed to rain tonight and I used cheap paint, so it will wash right off, I sent Lord Hokage a bowl of ramen too with a shadow clone, and I'm back now. No harm done."

Iruka opened his mouth to scold him further, closed it, Naruto had a

point he thought. And he had brought ramen as an apology. Still though, "Well Naruto, since you missed it, everyone is going to review the Transformation Jutsu!" Naruto shrugged as the entire class groaned, "Okay." He folded his hands into the activation seal and turned back into the pretty dark haired girl whose form he had assumed at Ichiraku's, only this time in the nude.

Iruka's expression was priceless as he recoiled in surprise and his nose started bleeding. "Sexy Jutsu!" Naruto declared as the entire class exploded into laughter, "A cheerful reminder that Transformation is good for more than just disguises!" He managed not to howl with laughter like everyone else, but it wasn't easy as Iruka seethed, "NARUTOOOOO!"

==That Afternoon==

Naruto scrubbed away at the paint he had left on the Third Hokage's stone face, not bothering to gripe. He knew it wouldn't do any good, and besides, he had planned ahead and used easy to wash off paint. It was coming off almost as soon as the water touched it. "Hey Naruto," Iruka called down, "Why'd you do all this?" Naruto looked up at him, "Couple of reasons actually."

He went back to scrubbing, continuing nonchalantly, "Number one, I thought it was pretty dang funny. Number two, I needed the stress relief, the graduation exam's tomorrow and even though I don't show it, that does stress me out a little. Number three, it was good exercise and I love a good chase. Number four, it made my friends laugh when they saw it, and that means way more to me than having to clean off this cheap paint I used. Hell applying it was more trouble than cleaning it off is!

"Number five, I wanted to see how good my transformation jutsu is, and apparently it's pretty good, which makes me feel a lot better about the exam tomorrow. Number six, I was going for ramen anyway, and I figured while I was making trouble I should go ahead with the prank I'd been batting around in my head for over a month. Go big or go home right?" Before Iruka could respond, Naruto continued, "Number seven, I got to use that joke with my Sexy Jutsu that I've been waiting to drop since I made it. Number eight, ramen!"

He paused and Iruka thought maybe he was done, but just as he opened his mouth Naruto said in a more subdued tone, "Number nine, I felt like reminding people I'm not a monster." Iruka flinched slightly, his reproach dying in his throat as he looked over at the face of the Fourth Hokage, the yellow paint and blue eyes making his resemblance to Naruto extremely clear as Naruto continued, "I pretend it doesn't get to me, but it's hard to ignore that a lot of people still look at me like I'm just the fox." His tail waved behind him, "I don't blame them for being afraid, he's not some house pet. He's downright scary, but that doesn't make being treated like some kind of homicidal freak any easier."

"And maybe I am a freak," he continued as he scrubbed slightly more vigorously, anger seeping into his voice as though he were scrubbing at the fear and resentment that had been the bane of his existence for so long, "But I'm a Hidden Leaf Village freak, and one day I'm gonna be Hokage so that they'll all know I'm here to protect them! From the fox and whatever else is out there! That I'm not a monster! I'm the son of the Fourth Hokage and even if most people don't know

it and they're not allowed to talk about it, I'm gonna do my old man proud!" he finished defiantly. Iruka smiled, it actually made sense when he put it like that!

==That Evening==

Naruto walked into Ichiraku's with Iruka and hugged Hinata, "Sorry I'm late, took a little bit longer than I expected to gather up all my climbing gear." Hinata smiled, "I don't mind." Hinata's father looked over his shoulder, and then turned around on his stool, "I mind. That was a very disrespectful thing to do Naruto!" Naruto looked chagrined, "Lord Hyuga, I cleaned it all up! And the rain tomorrow would've washed it off even if I hadn't! Besides Lord Hokage knows I didn't mean anything by it! He actually thought the expression on Lord Second's face would've been hilarious!"

Hiashi \_hmmmed\_, "You still should not have done it. You shirked your studies to do it and your graduation exam is tomorrow. You should have been studying, not out pulling childish pranks. Are you ready for the exam?" "Ready as I'll ever be," Naruto replied cheerily. Hiashi looked at Iruka, "Is he ready?" Iruka sat down, "Well his transformation Jutsu's up to snuff. He claims he used the shadow clone jutsu to send Lord Hokage a bowl of ramen this afternoon after his prank as an apology of sorts, so I suppose he's good on that too."

Hiashi \_hmmmed\_ again before looking back at Naruto, "At least you apologized." Then he turned back to his ramen. Hinata smiled as Naruto's relief was evident on his face, "You'll do great Naruto." Naruto smiled and hugged her, "I know you will too." He kissed her and earned a small growl from Hiashi, who still had reservations about Hinata and Naruto's relationship and insisted on chaperoning their dates. They quickly broke off the kiss and as Hinata blushed Naruto declared, "Let's eat!"

"Way ahead of you," his shadow clone replied around a mouthful of ramen from the seat next to Iruka.

==Later That Evening==

"You want me to \_WHAT?\_" Naruto exclaimed. Lord Hokage's expression was completely neutral, "I want you to throw the exam tomorrow. Feign incompetence and pretend to fail." "But why?!" Naruto exclaimed. Lord Hokage gestured to his crystal ball, "I've been able to discern that someone wants to steal a very important artifact and is planning to use the failure of a student to fool the student into thinking that stealing this artifact will allow them to pass the exam. The problem is that I'm not sure who it is. You have a reputation as a troublemaker and class clown already, you would be a likely target for this ruse. So, I want you to bait this traitor out into the open. Iruka's already on board with this plan if you decide to help us."

Naruto grinned, "You got it boss!"

==The Next Day==

Naruto looked at the pitiful replication of himself he had made, with a mix of embarrassment, disappointment and horror on his face and a sense of smug pride behind it as he took in his

transformed-on-creation doppelganger. "YOU FAAAAIL!" Iruka bellowed.

==That Night==

Naruto slunk into the Third Hokage's house, Lord Hokage was waiting for him, "Just like you said boss. Mizuki came right up to me and after about half an hour of me playing all depressed told me that if I stole the Scroll of Sealing I could pass." Lord Third nodded, "Alright then. Thank you for your help in this matter Naruto." He suddenly transformed into Naruto, "By the way, it's curious that you should have been asked to steal that scroll."

Naruto tilted his head, "Why?" Lord Hokage grinned at Naruto's grin, "Because that shadow clone army technique you made up is the first thing written in it!" Naruto's jaw dropped, "So I worked out a secret jutsu all on my own?" Lord Hokage adjusted Naruto's goggles while one of the ANBU got the scroll, "Yes you did. Your father would be very proud." He clapped Naruto on the shoulder, "Now go get some rest. You've earned it. Iruka will announce your passing the exam tomorrow morning."

Naruto grinned with tremendous satisfaction as he slunk all the way home in fox form. ''Wait till Hinata hears about this!''

==The Next Morning==

Naruto caught Hinata in a hug the minute he saw and gave her a passionate kiss as he lifted her off the ground and spun. Hinata blushed crimson, "N-Naruto?" then she saw his forehead protector, "You passed!" Naruto grinned, "Yeah, Boss Hokage asked me to purposely throw the exam because he wanted to lure out a traitor to the village. So I threw the exam, the traitor took the bait and when he got to the rendezvous Boss Hokage was waiting for him disguised as me!"

Hinata stared in shock, "Really? You got a mission straight from the Hokage?" Naruto grinned, "Yeah Iruka-Sensei's gonna tell everybody today, and get this, he's counting it as a C-rank! So I'm taking you out to dinner anywhere you want to celebrate!" Hinata squeaked with delight and threw her arms around Naruto kissing him delightedly, "We have to tell my father first. He was really upset when he heard you had failed." Naruto smiled, "Well yeah we gotta tell him! Can't have him thinking I lied about being ready for the exam now can we?" Hinata just laughed and hugged him tightly again.

## 2. Chapter 2: Konohamaru, Sakura & Sasuke

Chapter 2: Konohamaru, Sakura and Sasuke

==A Day Or Two Later==

"Well Naruto I'm glad you took an ordinary picture. To be honest I half expected you to wear clown makeup and strike some ridiculous pose." Naruto grinned, "I thought about it. Hinata talked me out of it." Lord Hokage smiled and thought, \_Thank heaven he's got Hinata to keep him under control.\_ Suddenly a young voice yelled, "I challenge you Old Man!" A small boy sprang through the door, a shuriken in hand.

As Naruto sprang up right, a kunai appearing in his hand, and the boy promptly tripped over his own feet and fell flat on his face. Naruto relaxed as the boy whined, "WAH! Something tripped me!" A man in dark glasses suddenly appeared in the doorway, "Honorable Grandson are you alright? And no, it's actually pretty flat in here." The kid who had attempted to attack the Hokage sat up angrily, his face flushed with embarrassment and then his eyes lit on Naruto, "You tripped me!"

Naruto's expression went from mild confusion to keep-calm-and-don't-mutilate-this-little-punk in an instant. "Three things kid. Number one, you tripped over your own feet. Number two if I had attacked you, you wouldn't be moving right now, and number three, you just tried to attack the Hokage. If you hadn't tripped over your own feet just now and actually managed to throw that shuriken, you probably would've lost use of the arm you threw it with for at least a few days, if not the rest of your life."

"Oh yeah? I'd like to see you try it!" An instant later, Naruto was holding him off the ground by the seat of his pants with one hand. The guy in the dark glasses yelled, "Put down the honorable grandson of the Third Hokage!" Naruto looked at him, looked at the stunned looking kid in his hand, then turned to the Hokage and pointed to the kid, "This yours Boss?" The Hokage sighed, "Yes he is." The kid suddenly laughed, "What's the matter tough guy? I thought you were gonna hit me! Scared cause my grandfather's the Hokage?"

"I DON'T CARE IF HE'S YOUR GRAND\_MOTHER!\_" Naruto roared before bouncing the kid off the ceiling and catching him by the back of the shirt before he could hit the floor. Lord Hokage winced and the guy in the glasses looked utterly shocked with his mouth hanging open as Naruto poked the stunned looking grandson in the chest, "Now look here short stack. Rule number one of being a ninja is know how to pick your fights! People twice your size strength and speed are people you should not pick fights with, and the Hokage is someone you should NEVER try pick a fight with because in addition to being the most powerful ninja in the village, he decides what missions you get as a ninja and how much you get paid.

"Rule number two is to acknowledge your mistakes and don't make them again! \_So when you trip over your own feet, admit you screwed up and leave with what dignity you have left! Don't try to pin it on somebody else because that somebody else might be the person who gets up and beats the snot out of you! The next person might care even less than I do who your grandpa is and actually hurt you! UNDERSTAND?!\_" The "honorable grandson" looked so stunned as Naruto set him down that he had to wonder if he were the first person to ever scold the kid. Naruto turned back to the Hokage, "Sorry about that boss. Some things just need to be said." He went back to his chair and sat down with a smile, "Where were we?"

==Fifteen Minutes Later==

Naruto paused in the middle of the sidewalk and turned around to where the poorly hidden "honorable grandson" was crouched under a piece of camouflage cloth with his feet showing. Naruto walked over to him, grabbed a hank of the camouflage cloth and yanked it sideways, right out of the "honorable grandson's" hands. The "honorable grandson" looked almost as shocked as he had when Naruto

had chewed his ass earlier.

"Why are you following me?" Naruto asked bluntly. The "honorable grandson" leapt to his feet, "Aha so you saw through my disguise!" Naruto waved the camouflage cloth of him, "A piece of road colored cloth and stillness in broad daylight do not a disguise make! If you're going to tail somebody you need to have at least some transformation jutsu! Camouflage cloth isn't made for tailing people, and it's certainly not made to hold up to scrutiny!"

"If tracking's what you want to do then study up on it before you try to follow another ninja, because they're more likely than anybody to spot you!" "So teach me!" The "honorable grandson" exclaimed pointing an insistent finger at Naruto. Naruto frowned, "I'm not a tracking ninja!" Then his frown turned thoughtful, "I suppose I could show you the transformation jutsu though." "ALRIGHT!" The "honorable grandson" exclaimed on the verge of jumping for joy. Naruto put a hand on top of his head to stop him from bouncing, "First though I need to know your name." "I'm Konohamaru!" Naruto smiled, "Alright then Konohamaru, I'm Naruto Uzumaki. Let's get started."

==The Next Day==

Naruto quickly pulled Hinata out of the way as Sakura and Ino crashed through the door, a pained expression crossing his face as they tripped and fell to the ground, still right up in each other's faces. Naruto leaned down with his face twitching slightly and interrupted Sakura and Ino's bickering, "Hey ladies, if you're going to race, could you please do it on the track and not in the hallways where you crash into people and \_step on my tail?!\_" Said tail waved forward and was indeed very rumpled from having been stepped on as Shikamaru, Choji and Hinata winced in sympathy.

Ino and Sakura flinched and apologized insincerely before getting up and rushing the seats next to Sasuke. Naruto wiggled his tail with a wince, "Those two really need to get over this rivalry thing before somebody gets hurt." "Are you okay Naruto?" Hinata asked as they headed to their seats. Naruto rubbed his trampled tail gently, "Yeah, I'll be alright. It's just a little sore and a lot of annoying." "Girls," Shikamaru said. "Present company excluded of course," he added as Naruto's tail lashed behind him irritably at the insinuation Hinata might have been included in that statement.

Naruto grinned as Hinata giggled at his over-protectiveness and kissed him on the cheek. Choji suddenly yelped as Sasuke pulled a Substitution and switched places with him, leaving Choji stranded between a quarreling Sakura and Ino who had both swooped to kiss Sasuke on the cheek at the same time. Instead they got Choji, who as Sakura and Ino reeled back in shock exclaiming in horror, "CHOJI?!" grinned and crossed his arms, "Wow. I got kissed by two pretty girls today!"

Sakura and Ino both recovered at the same time and went to punch poor Choji as though Sasuke's ditching them had been his fault. Naruto quickly pulled a substitution and caught both their fists, "That's enough you two!" he barked, "If you'd quit smothering the poor man he might not pull disappearing acts every time he sees one of you coming!" Ino and Sakura both looked properly stunned and then rather ashamed as Naruto let their hands drop.

"Now try to act like dignified Kunoichi instead of hopeless fan girls, because the hopeless fan girl routine is obviously not working!" Naruto pulled another substitution and switched places with Sasuke, who while not happy to be back between the two of them, was quietly rather glad Naruto had told his two most rabid fan girls off for him so adequately. He actually almost smiled as Sakura and Ino sat quietly next to him, too embarrassed to continue nagging him as the rest of the class tried to conceal their snickers. It wasn't every day the class clown got on somebody's case!

Naruto reappeared next to Choji who scratched his head, "Thanks Naruto, I really thought they were about to clobber me there." "They were," Naruto replied, "And don't worry about it, that's what friends are for." Then he turned to Hinata as he resumed his seat and whispered, "Thank you for not being like that." Hinata just smiled as he hugged her with one arm and his tail while Iruka-sensei called the class to order.

"As of today, you are all ninja. To get here you've faced difficulties and hardship," he started, "But that's nothing. What comes next will be far more difficult. Now you are only genin, first level ninja. All the genin will be grouped into three man squads, and each squad will be led by a jonin, an elite ninja." Naruto's tail coiled a little more protectively around Hinata, \_Please let me be with Hinata! I don't care who the third is just please let me be with Hinata!\_ His heart would have soared if he had known Hinata was thinking the same thing about him.

"Used to be we wanted each squad to have a balance of strengths and abilities," Iruka continued, "But now we have enough shinobi that we can train groups for specific types of missions, having them specialize from the beginning in areas their talents are best suited to and shuffle them later for balance, so that's how we set them up. I will now announce the squads."

Naruto and Hinata got an identical sinking feeling in their guts as they realized that their talents lay in radically different directions, Hinata's Byakugan giving her outrageous scouting potential, and Naruto's raw power from being a Jinchuriki making him ideal for heavy combat. By the time they finished exchanging a distressed glance, Iruka announced, "Squad Seven, Heavy Combat, Naruto Uzumaki, Sakura Haruno and Sasuke Uchiha!"

Naruto groaned internally, \_They put me with the bubblegum bitch and Captain Grumpy Britches?\_ "Squad Eight, Tracking, Hinata Hyuga, Kiba Inuzuka, and Shino Aburame!" Hinata tried to smile, at least Kiba and Shino were both competent! Meanwhile Sakura was rubbing her placement in Ino's face and Ino was utterly livid, "How did you get in his group?!" "I don't get it," Shikamaru said as he leaned down, "What's the big deal? No offense Captain Grumpy Britches." Sasuke's eye twitched, he kinda hated the nickname Naruto had stuck him with, even more so because he knew it was accurate.

Ino twisted around to look up at Shikamaru, "You are so clueless Shikamaru! Don't you get it?" "No I don't get it," Shikamaru replied wearily, "because I'm not a girl." Ino sighed, "You are so full of yourself. Jealousy's a terrible thing, I'd hate to be on your squad." Shikamaru didn't bother to point out the hypocrisy in her statement given how livid with jealousy she had been of Sakura an instant earlier. "Now Squad Ten," Iruka continued, "Capture and Retrieval,

Ino Yamanaka, Shikamaru Nara, and Choji Akimichi." Ino growled as Shikamaru slapped Choji a high five with a laugh, "What was that you said about hating to be on my squad?"

"Those are all the squads," Iruka finished. "Iruka-sensei," Ino asked, "Can we change squads?" "Sure," Iruka replied, "Just voluntarily hang back a year, let your graduating class move on without you and try your luck again next year." Everyone who had been thinking the question Ino had asked nearly crapped themselves. "Anyone want to complain about their teams?" Iruka asked with a sly smile. Even though there were several who did, they all wisely kept their mouths shut.

Iruka's grin grew, "Good. After lunch you'll meet your jonin supervisors. Until then class dismissed."

==A Few Minutes Later==

Sakura looked around outside, "Why did Sasuke run off so fast? I thought since maybe we were in the same group together maybe we could have lunch together and get to know each other!" "Excellent idea!" Naruto declared from right behind her, startling her into jumping, she spun angrily only to see that Naruto had sprung back several feet to clear out of her range. Naruto grinned, "Payback for stepping on my tail achieved", "Squad Eight was about to go have lunch too. I thought maybe our squad should join them since there's a chance we'll be working together in the future. I was gonna catch Sasuke too, but he took off too quick."

Sakura thought about asking why in the hell she'd want to have lunch with Naruto, but then she realized Hinata, Kiba and Shino were all there too. Sasuke was the only one missing, and as much as she didn't want to eat with Naruto, she couldn't really turn him down now without insulting Hinata, Kiba and Shino too. She didn't really care, but he had had a point that they might wind up working together someday and her common sense managed to override her impulses, if only narrowly.

"Well, okay," she said reluctantly, "I just, kinda wanted to eat with Sasuke." Naruto scratched his head and then grinned, "Well as it happens," He turned to Hinata, Kiba and Shino, "You guys are supposed to be the tracking team right? Think you can find him?" "Of course we can find him!" Kiba said confidently, "Let's go Akamaru!" Akamaru jumped down from inside Kiba's coat, his little black nose twitching before he bounded off, Kiba hot on his heels as he called, "Come on! Akamaru's got his scent!"

Naruto grinned, "Transform!" and turned into a fox the size of a horse, "Climb on!" Hinata hurriedly clambered up onto his back, Shino right behind her. As Shino climbed on Naruto looked over his shoulder, "You're not going to give me fleas are you?" "Only if you annoy me," Shino replied. Naruto's eyes bugged out, "Note to self, don't piss off Shino." Then he turned to Sakura, "Come on! We're gonna go find Sasuke!" When Sakura was still too stunned by his transformation to move, Naruto lifted her onto his back behind Shino and took off after Kiba and Akamaru who were by now quite a distance away.

Kiba and Akamaru skidded to a halt in front of an apartment building and finally noticed the giant fox bounding along behind them as

Naruto skidded to a halt next to them. "\_HOLY CRAP!\_" Kiba exclaimed as Akamaru growled at Naruto's fox form. "Don't worry Kiba," Hinata said reassuringly as Naruto crouched to allow his passengers off, "It's only Naruto." Naruto returned to his human form and rose, "Yeah and I'm glad we didn't see anybody on our way here. That form tends to startle people."

"Ya think?" Kiba asked, a little heat still in his voice as he got his blood pressure back down to normal from where it had surged in terror. Naruto just grinned and turned to Hinata, "Can you see him up there Hinata?" Hinata blinked with a smile, "Byakugan!" and veins swelled around her eyes as she turned her gaze up towards the apartment building. A moment later she pointed, "There he is." Naruto smiled and turned to Sakura, "There you go! He's right there, go get him." Sakura blushed in surprise, "Wait, aren't you coming too?"

Naruto raised an eyebrow, "I don't think he likes me that much. Perhaps the less I'm involved right now the better. Besides, you're the one that wanted to eat with him." Sakura blushed and then nodded, "Ok." She quickly ran through the front door and headed up. Naruto grinned, "Let's see how these two get along. Be right back." He bounced up to the first terrace then the second and then the third, slinking along the wall to the window Hinata had pointed to.

He crept up silently and heard Sasuke open the door. "Hi Sasuke!" Sakura exclaimed delightedly, "I thought maybe since we're on the same team we could have lunch together, and maybe get to know each other." Sasuke \_hmmmed\_ in a way that said he wasn't really digging the idea. Sakura, plowed right on, "I get it, you don't want to eat with Naruto! I don't blame you really, he's always picking fights with you!"

Naruto was about to mentally concede that she had a point, he and Sasuke were rather competitive, but then she kept going and whatever sympathy Naruto might have had for her evaporated, "Ya know why he's so annoying? It's cause he wasn't raised right! He doesn't have a mother or father, no one to teach him right from wrong. He just goes off and does whatever comes into his head! If I did things like Naruto, forget it! I mean my parents would get mad and I'd get in trouble! Of course I don't do it! But if you don't have parents to do it how would you know? He's selfish and bratty! He's all alone!"

At this point, Naruto casually swung in through the window, sitting on the sill in full view of the door. Sakura's expression went from smug know-it-all to absolute horror in an instant. Sasuke turned around and saw Naruto as Naruto leveled a cool glare at Sakura, "Hey Sakura, you know the number one rule of joke telling? Knowing your audience. I'm going to pretend you were just joking with all that you said just now, but let me tell you a little tidbit you obviously didn't know about Sasuke. \_\*\*I'm not the only orphan on this team Sakura!\*\*\_"

It took maybe ten seconds for that to sink in and then Sakura looked as though her puppy had just been run over right in front of her, "Oh my... Sasuke you're...? I'M SO SORRY! I DIDN'T KNOW!" Naruto cleared his throat, "Anyone else you should be apologizing to Sakura?" Sakura flinched as though Naruto had punched her, "Sorry Naruto, I just, I..."

"You don't like me because I compete with Sasuke and the two of us are to your eyes polar opposites. You assumed it was due to my upbringing since it was the only thing you knew about me that was different. If you had known the secret behind my tail, you would've blamed that. You would've taken anything at all to make me look worse in your head than Sasuke because that's what fit with your preconceptions of the two of us."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow at Naruto and then looked at Sakura. Sakura really didn't have a comeback as Naruto continued, "I think we're going to need to wait a little while before we have our get to know each other meal. Sasuke, you're part of a team now, so start working on that loner mentality of yours because you're stuck with us whether you like it or not. If you think a team is going to slow you down, then think about how you can make the team good enough to be an asset rather than a hindrance." Sasuke glared at Naruto defiantly as Naruto turned his gaze back to Sakura.

"Sakura, I know it's hard for you to wrap your head around, but why don't you try to understand that just because you think Sasuke is cuter than me that does not make him automatically better, and that maybe you don't really know either of us well enough to be making judgments about our character yet." He swung his legs back out and looked over his shoulder, "I for my part will work on being less competitive and what was that you called me Sakura? Annoying was it? Yes I'll try to work on that too. I'll see you two after lunch."

He stepped out and looked up, a smile spread across his face, "Hey Shikamaru, Choji, Ino! You guys want to join me, Hinata, Kiba and Shino for lunch?" "Yeah sure!" Shikamaru called back, "I think we can do that!" "What're we having?" Choji called. "Don't know yet! Was thinking barbeque!" Choji was on his feet in an instant, "Barbeque?!" Naruto turned and looked down at Hinata Kiba and Shino, "Hey guys, you want barbeque?!" Akamaru woofed happily and wagged his tail, Hinata smiled and Shino nodded. Naruto looked back up, "Yeah Choji! Barbeque!" Choji had mysteriously disappeared.

He reappeared a moment later on the ground floor. Ino stared at Choji's miraculous speed and Shikamaru laughed, "You said the magic word! We'll be right down!"

### 3. Chapter 3: Kakashi

#### Chapter 3-Kakashi

==An hour later==

Naruto filed in with Squads Eight and Ten and they found seats together. The lunch had been surprisingly productive for their group mentality and Naruto felt certain they had reached at least a certain level of understanding amongst them. He really hated that Sakura and Sasuke had missed it, but there would be time for that later when they weren't all in quite such nasty moods, assuming Sasuke was ever not in a nasty mood that is, he added to himself.

Soon the rest of the class filed in, Sasuke taking his usual seat and Sakura unsure where to sit since the squad groupings had scrambled the classroom's usual arrangement. Naruto sighed internally and waved her up to the empty seat next to his. She blushed in embarrassment

and came up slightly timidly. She sat down tentatively, and was quiet for a moment, "I'm...sorry about what I said earlier. It was really mean of me, even if you hadn't been there, I shouldn't have said it." Naruto looked at her, "Well you missed barbeque with good company. I'm in a better mood now, but please, from now on, think before you speak. You're too smart to be putting your foot in your mouth like that."

Sakura opened her mouth, unsure if the backhanded compliment meant he had accepted her apology or not. Just then though, the Jonin supervisors were coming in. Naruto's gaze flicked to each one as they came in and she noticed his eyebrows going up in surprise at least once. The supervisors were paired off with their squads and left until eventually only Squad Seven was left. Iruka smiled as he rolled up the list, "Well guys, I'm afraid your supervisor is a little late. Don't worry, he'll be here eventually. Just be patient and I'll be back to check on you in a little while."

"Hey Iruka-sensei," Naruto said, "Who is our supervisor?" "Kakashi Hatake," Iruka replied with a smile as Naruto's tail stood on end in surprise like an exclamation point, "He's a very skilled shinobi. I'm sure you'll learn a lot from him." Naruto nodded and sat back looking stunned, "Yeah. Yeah I think we will." Iruka smiled, "Alright then, I'll be back to check on you guys later." And out he went.

Sakura looked at Naruto who was still staring straight ahead in shock, "Do you know him Naruto?" Naruto's eyes snapped back into focus and he looked at her, "A little bit. Kakashi the Copy Ninja's ex-ANBU, one of their best. If he's our supervisor, then they weren't kidding about training us for heavy combat. We're learning from one of the best shinobi in the Hidden Leaf Village." "So how do you know him?" Sasuke asked.

"I hang around the Hokage's office a lot listening in to see if I can pick up anything useful," Naruto replied, "I've only heard Kakashi get a handful of missions, nothing lower than a B-rank, usually A-rank, and they're almost always solo missions." Sasuke and Sakura stared at him and then he continued quietly, "And he was one of my Dad's students, so I've met him once or twice." Sakura frowned in confusion, "Your dad was a Jonin?" Naruto looked her right in the eye, "My Dad was the Fourth Hokage."

Sasuke snapped around to look at him and Sakura was utterly floored. "Your...your dad was..." Sakura couldn't even process what Naruto had just told her. "Wait a minute," Sasuke said, "Wasn't the Fourth Hokage's family name Namikaze? You're an Uzumaki!" Sakura blinked and started getting ready to chew Naruto's ass for making something like that up, then Naruto replied, "I use my mom's name because Lord Third wanted to make sure that if my dad had enemies they wouldn't come after me for revenge. I was born Naruto Namikaze."

"So why do you play dumb?" Sasuke asked. Naruto looked at him, "I don't play dumb. You got into your head a long time ago that you were miles ahead of me and that because of that and the fact that I play jokes and skip class that I must be an idiot. If you paid attention though, my grades were actually a bit better than average. Could they have been better? Sure. Was I by any stretch the worst student in the room? No."

"It's rather like Shikamaru being too lazy to do his homework. It's

not that he can't, he's actually a certified genius. Homework just bores him out of his mind, so he doesn't do it." Sakura and Sasuke both stared, they had both assumed Shikamaru was a lazy slowwitted slacker. "Or everyone assuming Choji's a fat lazy slob because he eats so much," Naruto continued, "His family's special Expansion Jutsu's require a lot of energy and reserves, so he has to eat in order to keep his strength up. People assume Shino has bad hygiene because of his bug thing. Completely wrong. Have you ever seen the guy's teeth? Whiter than chalk, and clean as a hospital. The Aburame clan work with bugs the way Kiba and the Inuzuka clan do their dogs."

Sakura and Sasuke were silent as they realized they had mistakenly made those assumptions themselves and Naruto continued, "People think Hinata's not brave because she's soft-spoken and shy, but she didn't even flinch when she found out why almost all the adults treat me like a monster." Sasuke and Sakura stared, "What?" "What are you talking about Naruto? What do you mean all the adults treat you like a monster?" Sakura asked.

Naruto snorted out a short laugh, "You guys never paid any attention to me at all did you? Did you never see me sitting on the swing set all alone watching while the other kids met their parents? Did you never wonder why I was always alone until I became friends with Hinata? Why I didn't have any friends other than her until I made friends with Shikamaru and Choji?" Sasuke and Sakura were really staring now. Naruto smiled sadly, "You do remember what attacked the village sixteen years ago on the day I was born right?"

"The Nine-Tailed Fo..." The words died in Sakura's throat as she saw Naruto's tail waving gently behind him. Her eyes widened, "No...way..." Naruto kept smiling that strange sad smile, "Very much way. You see the only way to stop the Nine Tails is to trap it inside a living body. It had been in my mother, but apparently someone set it loose while she was having me. After that my parents sacrificed themselves to seal it away inside me because I was the only person it could be sealed into once it had escaped my mom."

He unzipped his jacket and raised his shirt to show them the seal, "Lord Third forbade anyone who knew about it from talking about it so that our generation wouldn't know and shun me for it." He put his shirt back down, "It didn't work of course, and after I found out I started keeping this first tail manifested. There was no reason to hide it, and surprisingly enough, everyone I've told about it has gone on completely normal. A lot of people still don't know of course, but now you do." He sighed, "So that's my crappy back story."

He looked at them, "Anyone else feel like having a little show and tell?" Sakura had to sit down, she was quiet for a moment then, "Well geez Naruto, you kinda just made every problem I've ever had seem petty and insignificant." "Not mine," Sasuke said from his seat in the middle of the room. Naruto looked at him as Sakura stared, was Sasuke really that selfish or had something that horrible actually happened to him that she didn't know about? "Well yes," Naruto replied, "but then again your situation is considerably more effed up than mine isn't it?"

Sasuke flinched He knows about what happened? he thought. Sakura's gaze flashed from Naruto to Sasuke and back again several times, so

something really horrible actually had happened to Sasuke? Just as she was about to ask him about it a voice drawled from the door, "Well, I'm glad to see you three aren't in here wasting time." They all turned and Naruto waved, "Hi Kakashi. So you're our new teacher huh?"

"It looks that way," Kakashi replied, "Why don't we go somewhere more comfortable to talk? You're genin now, I think it's time to get out of the classroom."

==Forty Five Minutes Later==

After showing them the area they'd be using to train, Kakashi led them to one of the village's many rooftop gardens, and propped against the rail facing them, "Alright, why don't you introduce yourselves, one at a time." "Is there anything specific you want to know?" Sakura asked, "Or just whatever we can think of to say?" Kakashi spread his hands, "Things you like," he said in a laidback drawl, "things you hate, dreams for the future, hobbies, things like that," he finished as he crossed his arms and continued to look at them with his uncovered eye. "Why don't you tell us about yourself first so we can see how it's supposed to go," Naruto asked with a slight grin and a raised eyebrow.

Kakashi looked at him and pointed at himself, "Me? I'm Kakashi Hatake. Things I like and things I hate, I don't feel like telling you that. My dreams for the future...never really thought about it. As for my hobbies, I have lots of hobbies." That was kinda useless, Sakura and Sasuke thought, All he told us was his name. Kakashi gestured to them again, "Ok, your turn. Naruto, you first." Naruto grinned, "Alright. My name is Naruto Uzumaki, I like ramen, sleep, and learning new things, and I love my girlfriend. I hate baseless prejudice, boredom, and the awkward silence after a bad joke."

"My dream is to become Hokage, protect the Hidden Leaf Village, and one day work up the nerve to propose and marry my girlfriend. My hobbies are mostly pranks and indulging myself with the things I like." Kakashi's face seemed largely expressionless, but it was hard to tell with seven eighths of it covered up, "Alright, next up." He pointed to Sakura. Sakura smiled, "My name is Sakura Haruno, what I like, I mean the person I like is uh..." She shot a glance at Sasuke, "My hobby is uh..." another glance at Sasuke, "My dream for the future is..." she couldn't get past an excited giggle.

"And, what do you hate?" Kakashi asked. Sakura got as far as "Na-" before she cut herself off, remembering what had happened earlier that day. Kakashi raised an eyebrow, "Naaaruto?" Naruto sighed, "Old habits die hard." He sat forward, "The translation of all that was that she likes Sasuke, wants to marry him, makes a hobby out of fantasizing about him asking her out and really doesn't like me that much because she thinks I'm an annoying idiot."

Sakura was as pink as her hair and Sasuke was wide eyed trying very hard not to look at her as she nearly fainted from embarrassment. "Well alright then," Kakashi said as though he couldn't have cared less, "Last one." Sasuke immediately sobered back up, "My name, is Sasuke Uchiha. I hate a lot of things, and I don't particularly like anything." That second bit earned a bit of a hurt squeak from Sakura as he continued, "What I have is not a dream, because I will make it a reality. I'm going to restore my clan, and destroy a

certain someone."

The murderous intensity in his voice led to a rather prolonged silence until Naruto sat back, "Well then, guess you've got a choice to make." Everyone looked at him as he continued, "Which of those two is more important to you Sasuke? Rebuilding your clan, or killing Itachi?" Sasuke flinched like Naruto had backhanded him instead of mentioning his brother's name. Sakura's eyes darted back and forth between the two of them, wide as saucers as a voice in the back of her mind wondered if maybe she was about to get to find out what had happened to Sasuke that was so bad that even Naruto had declared it effed up. Kakashi simply watched, wondering to himself where Naruto was going with this.

"Cause if what I've heard about Itachi is true," Naruto continued, "Then if you care anything at all about rebuilding your clan, you'll start working on that before you go after him, since there's a very good chance you won't come back from that hunt in one piece, if you come back at all." Sasuke's eyes bugged out and he looked even more stunned than he had before, a decidedly novel expression for him. How had he not thought about that? He wondered, \_When did Naruto get so smart? When did I get so \_\_\*\*dumb\*\*\_\_ that I didn't think about that?! If Itachi kills me then he'll be the only Uchiha left!\_

Then Naruto started talking again and Sasuke saw he had raised Sakura's hand over their heads, "I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure I recall hearing that Sakura here has a rather substantial crush on you. Since we're going to be seeing a lot of each other from now on, perhaps she would be a good place to start with that trying to rebuild your clan thing?" Sasuke blinked and then kicked himself, \_HOW HAVE I BEEN THIS BLIND AND STUPID?!\_ his internal monologue screamed. Outwardly he looked at Sakura like he never had before, gone was the annoying fan girl, replaced instead with a possible future mother for the new and revitalized Uchiha clan! "You may have a point there Naruto."

Sakura turned \_pinker\_ than her hair and squealed with delight before hugging Naruto, "Oh my god Naruto you're the best! I take back every mean thing I ever said about you!" Naruto smiled as he patted her on the back, "Well good, I'm glad we finally cleared the air. Shouldn't you be showing Sasuke how good Sakura hugs feel though? I don't mind, but Hinata might." Sakura immediately withdrew and seemed to teleport onto Sasuke, sliding into his lap, throwing her arms around him and kissing him full on the lips. Sasuke's eyebrows receded upwards behind his hairline and his eyes were the size of saucers, then he smiled and kissed her back.

Kakashi smiled, "Well good, you are all unique, have your own ideas, and seem to be bonding as a team already. We'll have our first mission tomorrow." "Sounds good," Naruto said with a grin, "What's our mission?" "It's a task," Kakashi replied, "That the four of us will do together. A survival exercise." Sasuke and Sakura broke off their game of tonsil hockey for a moment, "Survival exercise?" "I thought we were supposed to have a real mission," Sakura protested, "Not more practice."

"This is not like your previous training," Kakashi replied. After a moment of silence, "So what kind of training is it then?" Naruto asked. Kakashi began chuckling gruesomely, but didn't really answer. Naruto and Sasuke got a sinking feeling in their guts, but Sakura

didn't and asked, "Hey that's a perfectly normal question, what's so funny?" Kakashi seemed to smile, and answered in an almost singsong voice, "Well if I tell you the answer, you're not going to like it."

As Sakura finally felt the sinking feeling and it cranked up for Naruto and Sasuke, Kakashi continued, "Of the thirty graduates who just came here, only nine will be accepted as genin. The other twenty one will be weeded out and sent back to the Academy. In other words, this is a make-it-or-break-it, pass/fail test, and the chance that you'll fail is at least seventy percent." Naruto Sakura and Sasuke stared in horror.

"See?" Kakashi asked, "Didn't I tell you you wouldn't like it?" "That's crazy!" Sakura protested, "We worked hard to get here! What about the Graduation Exam? What was that for?" "Oh that," Kakashi said dismissively, "That was just to select the candidates who might become genin, or not. That's how it is. I decide whether you pass or fail. Be at the designated training spot at five a.m. and bring your ninja gear. That's it, you're dismissed. Oh, and tomorrow you'd better skip breakfast, or else, you'll puke."

He promptly turned, put one foot on the rail and jumped away so fast he seemed to have disappeared. Naruto Sakura and Sasuke stared after him, then Naruto turned to Sakura and Sasuke, "Okay, before you two go continue your make out session, we need to talk strategy." "What?" Sakura asked. Naruto looked at her, "Do you want to go take that test without preparing for it at all? We'll have to work as a team whatever it is, so we need to get to know each other and our strengths and weaknesses now so we can figure out how to cover them."

"And if neither of you have any previous engagements, I think we should work some on fighting as a team. We're supposed to be being trained for heavy combat, we need to be able to fight like it." Sakura smiled nervously, "Yeah, um about that, I'm actually not sure why I was put on a Heavy Combat squad." Sasuke and Naruto looked at her, then Sasuke said, "Well then that sounds like even more reason for us to practice, we need to find out or you could wind up being completely useless." If Sakura had had any lingering doubts about the need to practice, they vaporized instantly in face of the possibility of being deemed "useless" by Sasuke.

She leapt up, "Let's go!"

==Twenty Minutes Later==

Naruto Sakura and Sasuke stood at the Memorial Stone, looking around. Naruto snorted, "Figures he'd choose here for our training ground. He's always here." Sakura and Sasuke looked at him, "Why?" Naruto walked around the stone and suddenly pointed to two names, "That's why." Sasuke and Sakura walked around and leaned close to see what he was pointing at, "Obito Uchiha and Rin Nohara," Sakura read before looking back at Naruto, "Who are they?"

Naruto crossed his arms, "They were his teammates. They died in the last war. Kakashi comes here every day to mourn them, and all the others that have died." "That's so sad!" Sakura exclaimed, and Naruto nodded, "It is." He suddenly wrapped an arm around her and another around Sasuke, "So let's make sure we don't all wind up dead

aye?"

Sakura and Sasuke looked at him like he was slightly unhinged, then they smiled and nodded, "Alright. Let's get started."

==The Next Morning==

The three of them dragged themselves up to the Memorial Stone, yawning wearily. "Hi guys," Naruto yawned. Sakura yawned and rubbed her eyes, "Morning." Sasuke didn't say anything, just nodded and made a sort of dozy grunt. They stood there for a while, then Naruto looked around and wandered off, looking around and squatting down to check the ground occasionally.

By the time they were all fully awake, the sun was high in the sky. Naruto looked around irritably, "He's late." It was another hour still before Kakashi finally walked up, "Good morning everyone." They all glared at him, "You're late." "Well a black cat crossed my path, so I had to take a different route," Kakashi replied with a smile. His three students were unamused.

"Well," Kakashi said, clearing his throat, "Let's get started." He walked over to a stump and pulled out an alarm clock, which he promptly set on the stump, "Here we go." The three young ninja looked at it as he explained, "This is set for noon." There was a slight jingling as he held up two small bells, "Your assignment is very simple, you just have to take these bells from me. That's all there is to it. If you can't get them by noon, you go without lunch."

That earned a noise of exclamation as the three realized that was why he had told them to skip breakfast. "You will be tied to those posts," Kakashi continued, "and you'll watch while I eat my lunch in front of you." The three all looked slightly mortified by the notion, their stomachs had all long since started rumbling.

Suddenly Sakura noticed something, "Wait a minute, there's three of us! How come there's only two bells?" "That way," Kakashi replied, "At least one of you will wind up tied to a post and ultimately disqualified for failing to complete the mission." The three all stared in shock as he continued, "That one goes back to the Academy. Then again, all three of you could flunk out too." They all three glanced at each other and all silently worried that the teamwork they had worked so hard on the night before might come undone now.

"You can use any weapons, including shuriken," Kakashi told them, "If you're not prepared to kill me, you won't be able to take the bells." "But those weapons are too dangerous Sensei!" Sakura protested. "Calm down Sakura," Naruto said grimly, "He knows what he's doing. He wouldn't be a jonin if he couldn't keep himself alive against us." Sakura thought about arguing but saw the hard light in Naruto and Sasuke's eyes and realized they were right, Kakashi surely wouldn't tell them to go all out if he couldn't handle it.

"When I say start, you can begin," Kakashi said. Naruto and Sasuke shifted into ready positions, Sakura quickly following suit as Kakashi told them to get ready, "aaand... START!" Naruto immediately folded his hands into an activation sign as Sasuke and Sakura ran to either side, "Shadow Army Jutsu!" Kakashi was suddenly surrounded by shadow clones, all of which immediately pounced on him.

Kakashi leapt upward, causing the shadow clones attacking him to collide and disappear, "Well, you're certainly not wasting any-" "Shuriken Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto yelled and Kakashi's eyes widened as he searched for a shuriken flying at him to multiply into a storm instantly, wondering how Naruto knew such an advanced jutsu. As he searched the Naruto clones, another voice suddenly yelled from above him, "Fire style! Fireball Jutsu!"

Kakashi quickly pulled a substitution with a nearby log and narrowly evaded Sasuke falling on him from above. As he landed where the log had been something suddenly grabbed his ankle, he looked down and saw a hand poking up out of the ground before the hand yanked his leg and tried to drag him into a hole. Kakashi managed to yank his foot free of his shoe and escape, the Naruto clone under him surfacing with nothing but Kakashi's shoe. Kakashi sprang back and narrowly managed to cut the line of the snare his now bare foot landed in.

He landed on his hands and back flipped back to his feet, but before he could say anything a pair of feet slammed into his back and the Naruto clone lunged forward, hands outstretched for the bell at Kakashi's side, Kakashi quickly struck the Naruto clone, and was surprised to see it bend but not break under the force of his blow, the outstretched hands actually managing to brush one of the bells before Kakashi leapt away, seeing as he did that it had actually been Sakura transformed into a Naruto clone. \_That's a clever move,\_ he thought, \_a clone would've dissipated, but Sakura was able to keep going.\_

Sakura spun as she landed and two Naruto clones caught her, hefting her upright and then allowing her to spin and hurl them one after the other at Kakashi like living javelins. Kakashi ducked and dealt them both uppercuts as they were nearly upon him, causing them both to disperse. Then suddenly Sasuke was hoisted on the shoulders of the Naruto mob and threw a shadow windmill shuriken at Kakashi. Kakashi caught it and immediately realized something was amiss, then it turned into Naruto, quickly grabbing for the bells and actually almost getting one. Kakashi dropped him and shot a stomp into him, thinking it to be another shadow clone.

As his foot connected Naruto grabbed him and wrenched his leg sideways, hurling Kakashi to the ground before rolling on top of him and pulling Kakashi's leg with him as Naruto clones leapt to pile on. Kakashi pulled a substitution with the log from earlier, only to find Naruto still clinging to him, and Sasuke and Sakura waiting for him, Sakura quickly grabbing him in a full nelson and Sasuke quickly snatching at the bells as Kakashi kicked at him with his free leg. Sasuke pulled up short to dodge Kakashi's kick and before he could lunge again Kakashi broke Sakura's grip, and with an almighty heave hurled her into Sasuke before driving a heavy hand into Naruto who finally let go with an ''oof''.

Kakashi sprang back away from them and found himself fending off the remaining Naruto clones as Naruto Sakura and Sasuke regrouped. By the time Naruto caught his breath, all his shadow clones had been broken. Kakashi watched the three of them warily, "Well, you are all doing very well, but you still have to get one of the bells, and there are still only two." Naruto patted Sasuke on the shoulder, "I think it's time for that technique I told you about."

Sasuke looked at him, "Are you sure?" Naruto nodded, "Yeah, I'm sure." Sasuke nodded, "Alright then..." Kakashi watched them warily, what were they up to? Sasuke held his arm out to Sakura and she took hold of it and the seat of his pants as Naruto backed up, then she picked him up off the ground and spun him, once, twice, three times and then on the fourth spin she let him go and sent him flying at Kakashi, "BULL AND SNAKE JUTSU!"

Kakashi easily dodged and suddenly had his feet kicked out from under him as Sasuke grinned triumphantly, "Shadow Army Jutsu!" Kakashi's eyes bugged out as Sasuke suddenly turned into Naruto and multiplied into a hundred as a pair of arms wrapped around him and latched on, legs going around his arms and binding them to his sides to keep him from making any hand signs. Kakashi's eyes widened and then the shadow clones fell on top of him.

As Kakashi laid there with about twenty Narutos on top of him and someone else under him, he wondered, \_Now how did they do that?\_ Sakura suddenly ran up, plunged a hand through the pile of Narutos and plucked one of the bells from Kakashi's waist. One of the arms holding Kakashi suddenly turned loose and reached down, taking the other bell as the Naruto clones adjusted their weight to allow the arm mobility.

"That's mine," Sasuke said, his breathing labored under the pile of Kakashi and Narutos. Then suddenly Sakura put hers back and Naruto took it, "And because Sakura put this one back, I'm able to take it from you too!" The Narutos all laughed. Sasuke raised his hand and one of the Narutos, maybe the original high fived him as another high fived Sakura, "Teamwork guys! That's the way to do it!" "Naruto...can't...breathe!" Sasuke groaned.

"Oh sorry!" The Naruto clones all exclaimed in unison before grabbing Kakashi, and leaping up with each of Kakashi's limbs being held by at least four Narutos while four more held onto his torso and another one helped Sasuke up. As the Naruto clones tipped Kakashi upside down so that if he twisted loose he'd fall on his head, Sakura fussed over Sasuke for a minute and scolded Naruto for not taking the weight off sooner. Naruto protested that it was the first time they had ever used that jutsu and Sasuke smiled and told Sakura to calm down.

Then they turned to Kakashi, "So," Sakura asked, "Do we pass? We each took a bell off you." Kakashi thought for a moment, a smile behind his mask where they couldn't see it, "Mmm, yes I think so, but first you must answer one question. You seem to all understand teamwork very well, and your solution of putting a bell back was very inventive, but what if you three were on a mission with enemy ninja chasing and badly outnumbering you, and one of you had to stay behind to allow your teammates to live and carry on the mission? What would you do?"

They were all three dumbfounded for a second and then Sakura said quietly, "I would stay behind, and let Naruto and Sasuke go on without me." "LIKE HELL YOU WOULD!" Naruto and Sasuke bellowed at the same time. Sakura and Kakashi were both stunned for a second and then Sakura blushed a very deep crimson, "I would too! I'm the weakest link on this team and we all know it!"

"Bullcrap!" Naruto barked, "None of the flying techniques would work without your strength to throw us! I'd stay behind! I've got the Nine

Tails! If anyone's got the raw power to fight out tooth and nail it's me! And if I die the Nine Tails gets loose and goes on a rampage killing everybody I was fighting! They kill me and they might as well light a paper bomb in their underpants!"

"Well I'm not leaving either of you behind!" Sasuke barked, "If I'm to be the last of the Uchiha then so be it! I'm not letting the only friends I have die! Even if I die the Uchiha go out on an honorable note! Naruto you know full well Hinata would kill us if anything happened to you, and Sakura, you could find somebody to replace me!" Sakura and Naruto both looked at him, then they smiled and Sakura wrapped him in a hug while Naruto slapped him on the back, "Well shoot Grumpy Britches, I didn't know ya cared!"

Naruto laughed as Sasuke shot him a long suffering look and then he sobered up, "I think we're agreed then, we'd stay together and win together!" "What if you lose and die?" Kakashi asked. "Then we die honorable deaths in the line of duty in good company!" Naruto declared. "What about your mission?" Kakashi asked, "you can't complete it if you're dead." "Then we'll complete it with our dying breaths," Sasuke declared. "Or at the very least we'll ensure that someone else can finish it in our stead," Sakura added. "We're shinobi," Naruto declared, "We'll endure until the mission's complete."

Kakashi blinked, then he raised an eyebrow, "You three are smarter than you look. Or perhaps dumber, given that your answers all bordered on suicidal. Either way," he continued with a smile, "they were good answers. Can you put me down now Naruto? Without dropping me on my head?" The Naruto clones quickly set Kakashi upright and disappeared. Kakashi smiled at them, "Well congratulations. You all pass."

Naruto grabbed Sakura and Sasuke and lifted them both off the ground and danced around for a second with them, "WHOOOOO! Dinner's on me tonight guys! WE PASSED!"

\_Yes, Naruto in this version is aware of who his father is and as a result has met Kakashi more than once. If Kakashi were around more, Naruto would probably view Kakashi much the same way he does Iruka, as a big brother figure as much as a teacher.\_

\_ Since I know their battle with Kakashi probably has you wondering, I decided to address the apparently tremendous strength Sakura's possessed since the start of the show when punching the crap out of Naruto hard enough to send him flying, and in the second part of the series to casually not just send him flying, but launch him several hundred meters. That kind of strength does not just come out of nowhere and then disappear again, and if it should show up anywhere it's in combat. So Sakura now has access to her mountainous strength at all times, not just when she's aimed at Naruto, which is how she wound up on the Heavy Combat Team with Naruto and Sasuke.\_

\_ And because in the anime they are shown using flying techniques like these, I decided to expand upon their usage. The Sasuke that fell towards Kakashi right at the beginning was actually a shadow clone so that the impact of landing from such a fall wouldn't break Sasuke's legs. And since I'm sure you're wondering, The Bull And Snake Jutsu requires a throw and double substitution. The shoe Naruto had taken off Kakashi was right next to Kakashi when they executed

it. Naruto executed a Substitution to switch places with it as Sakura threw Sasuke, then as Sasuke drew level with Kakashi, he used a Substitution to switch places with Naruto, who was then able to use his Shadow Army Jutsu to instigate an instant dog pile and finally pin Kakashi.\_

\_ And I know somebody's going to think that there's no way they could possibly have beaten Kakashi like that and to that I reply that Kakashi canonically stated that if they had been working together they might have succeeded, so I say the scenario presented in this chapter is plausible, especially since I feel certain Kakashi was holding back.\_

\_ Also, I'm sure you're wondering about Sasuke's answer to Kakashi's final question, given that in the anime he's a totally selfish jackass who would honestly have most likely left Naruto and Sakura to die even before he went rogue. The answer is simple, this Sasuke just had his world rocked, so he's much more open than usual to the two people who did the rocking, and while Sasuke does have many faults, stupidity is not one of them, and he's smart enough to know that being the only person in the group to not volunteer to stay behind after a question like that would make him look like a completely untrustworthy jackass and probably get him failed. Also, Naruto might've given him and Sakura a heads up that Kakashi might ask such a question.\_

#### 4. Chapter 4: To The Land of Waves!

\_Special Thanks to EmpressofMelnibone for the idea to have weapon summoning seals stitched into ninja clothing!\_

=Chapter 4: To The Land Of Waves! =

==A Month, 22 D-Rank, and 5 C-Rank Missions Later==

Naruto landed on the tree branch, "I'm at point A." "Take it slow Naruto," Kakashi told him. "Target sighted," Sasuke said into his com-link. "I think we're ready," Sakura said. "Proceed to capture," Kakashi replied. Naruto grinned and the three young genin leapt into the clearing, circling the escaped cat and cutting off all avenues of escape. It attempted to bound between Sakura and Naruto only to be caught from behind by Sasuke.

The cat attempted to scratch him only to find its claws useless against Sasuke's thick clothes. Sasuke calmly activated his Sharingan and after a moment of eye contact, the cat stopped struggling and passed out. "Confirmation of red ribbon on right ear?" Kakashi asked through the com-link. "Confirmed," Sakura replied, "Positive ID." "Good," Kakashi said, "Lost pet Tora captured. Mission accomplished."

==An Hour Later==

The cat received an exceedingly unpleasant awakening as Sasuke handed the sleeping cat back to its owner, the wife of the Land of Fire's feudal lord who loudly and joyfully proceeded to smother the unhappy cat before paying the clerk for the mission. Naruto grinned as the frustratingly elusive cat struggled, \_Stupid cat deserves it.\_

Lord Hokage looked at a list as Kakashi turned to him, "For Squad Seven's next mission we have several available tasks, babysitting the chief councilors three year old, helping his wife to do the shopping, digging up potatoes in..." Naruto groaned as the list went on and then perked up when he heard, "And a new C-Rank, guarding a bridge builder on his journey home to the Land of Waves." "C-Rank to the Land of Waves!" Naruto grinned to Sakura and Sasuke, "I'm down for that."

Lord Hokage looked up at him, "Are you sure you're sufficiently healed from your last

C-Rank?" Naruto had gotten some fairly nasty bites off a wolf that had been terrorizing some local farms. It had turned out to be more than one, which was how the wolf had gotten Naruto after the first wolf had been subdued. Sakura had broken its neck and Naruto had gotten away with only two bite wounds, but the second one had been rather deep and bled quite a lot. It had hurt, but Hinata's loving ministrations and attention when he got back had made it completely worth it.

That was why they had taken several D-Ranks over the past two weeks, they needed something to occupy them while Naruto healed. Now Naruto grinned and pushed up his sleeve to show that his arm was completely unblemished where the wolf had bitten him thanks to the healing abilities imparted by the Nine-Tails, "Good as new and ready to fight Boss!"

The Hokage smiled, "Alright then. Bring in our visitor!" A moment later a door opened and an old man with a bottle of alcohol in his hand walked in, "What the? A bunch of snot nosed kids?!" He paused and chugged for a moment before continuing, "And you, the little one with the idiotic look on your face, you really expect me to believe you're a ninja?" Naruto looked at Sakura and then at Sasuke, then he frowned irritably as he confirmed that they were indeed both taller than him, "Oh this is going to be a long mission..."

The old man continued after taking another drink, "My name is Tazuna, I'm from the Land of Waves and a master bridge builder. I must return to my country. I'm building a bridge there that will change our world, and I expect you to get me there safely, even if it means giving up your lives." Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke swapped glances and sighed, "Why do they always think we're cowards who'll wimp out at the first sign of trouble?"

==Two Hours Later==

They met at the front gate and casually fell into a subtle formation around Tazuna as they headed out. Naruto led the formation so that he'd have an easier time resisting the constantly growing urge to lodge his foot in the old drunk's keester. Sasuke and Sakura had a difficult time not acting on a similar urge, which made it fortunate that Kakashi was bringing up the rear.

Not much was said after Tazuna got tired of complaining. Then Kakashi started whistling a cheerful tune and Naruto Sakura and Sasuke all had to try very hard to not stop and look around as they heard the team signal for, "At least one pursuer, be on your guard..." Suddenly there was a splash behind them, and two masked and cloaked figures leapt seemingly from nowhere, a cutting chain whipping out from their

massive metal gauntlets and wrapping around Kakashi, shredding him as the two enemy ninja yanked the chain taut.

Or it would have if Kakashi hadn't been revealed to be a shadow clone. The two enemy ninja suddenly leapt back to back, only for Kakashi to appear next to them, casually grabbing them by their faces and slamming their heads together. That Kakashi turned out to be a clone too, disappearing as the real Kakashi yelled, "Now!"

Sasuke quickly unleashed his Fireball Jutsu and set the two enemy ninja on fire. They howled with pain as their armor was heated scorchingly hot, and then suddenly Sakura leapt and delivered a double flying pile driver with her own armored gauntlets that actually dented the two enemy ninjas' helmets, sending them crumpling to the ground. She leapt away and two Naruto clones quickly covered them with a chain net pulled from a seal stitched into his coat as half a dozen more ringed Tazuna facing outward, eyes sharp and kunai at the ready in case there were more attackers. As Sakura and Sasuke helped the two Naruto clones bind the two unconscious assailants in the net, the remaining Naruto clones kept a sharp eye out until Kakashi gave the all clear signal and dropped from a tree.

As he walked over, Sasuke tied a chain around the opening of the net and Sakura helped the Naruto clones hoist the two subdued ninja into the air over a sturdy tree branch. Kakashi walked over from the tree line, "Mr. Tazuna, we need to talk." He walked over to the two bound ninja as they started coming around, "These two are chunin from the Village Hidden in the Mist; their specialty is relentless attack. They keep fighting no matter how steep the cost."

"How did you know about our ambush?" One of the two Mist ninja asked. "A puddle," Kakashi replied, "On a clear day, when it hasn't rained in weeks?" "In that case," Tazuna asked, "Why'd you leave it for the genin to do the fighting?" "I could have taken these two out quickly," Kakashi replied, "but then I'd have learned nothing." He looked at Tazuna, "I had to know who their target was, and what they were after."

"What are you getting at?" Tazuna grumped. "This," Kakashi replied, "Were they after us, ninja attacking ninja, or were they after you, the master bridge builder? When you put in your request, you asked for standard protection, from robbers and highwaymen. You didn't say there were ninja looking for you, hunting you down. If we knew this, it would be a B-rank mission or higher," Kakashi continued, "Our task was simply to get you to your destination and protect you while you finished building your bridge. If we had known we'd be fielding attacks from enemy ninja, we'd have staffed differently and charged for the cost of a B-rank mission. Apparently you have your reasons, but lying to us is not acceptable. We are now beyond the scope of this mission."

Tazuna had the decency to look at least a little ashamed as the silence stretched out for a moment. Finally Naruto \_hmmmed\_, "Kakashi-sensei, we've already taken the mission, and if these guys were even average for whatever group is after him, then unless he's got an army out to get him, I think the four of us can handle it. We're training for heavy combat after all, what better practice is there than fighting other ninja? We can send him a bill afterwards for the difference."

Tazuna flinched at the mention of a bill, and Kakashi scratched his head thoughtfully, "You know Naruto, I do believe you have a point. We can probably handle it. If it gets rough I'll send a message back to the village letting them know we might need a reinforcement team." He turned back to Tazuna, "So Mr. Tazuna, it looks like you're stuck with us after all."

"However," he added, turning back to the two bound ninja, "I see no reason not to find out whether or not we'll need the back up team now while we've got these two here to answer our questions." "We won't tell you anything!" One of the two bound ninjas exclaimed. "I rather expected you to see it that way," Kakashi said with a cold smile behind his mask, "So I'm going to let Naruto beat an answer out of you."

The Naruto clones all suddenly brandished arm sized limbs quickly collected from the tree line. Before the two Hidden Mist ninja could react, the Naruto clones all leapt forward and started hitting them with their makeshift bats with vicious glee. It wasn't long before, "ALRIGHT WE'LL TALK! WE'LL TALK! JUST CALL HIM OFF!" Kakashi smiled, "I rather thought you'd see it my way. Ok Naruto, you can stop hitting them now."

The Naruto clones all backed off, but they kept their sticks at the ready. "So," Kakashi asked, "Who sent you?" "We took a contract to get rid of the bridge builder. We weren't told who took it out, the boss just said go kill this guy." Kakashi frowned, "And who is your boss?" The two Hidden Mist ninja looked at each other and promptly clammed up. Kakashi poked them, "You can tell us now or you can find out the hard way how bad an idea it is to keep your mouths shut." "He'll kill us if we talk!" one of the two exclaimed. "That'll be a mercy after \_I'm\_ done with you," Kakashi told them coldly.

The two swapped another glance but didn't say anything, then Kakashi looked at Sasuke, "Sasuke, set them on fire. Let's see if the heat loosens their tongues any." Sasuke's hands started flashing through the activation sequence for his fireball jutsu and one of the two bound ninja exclaimed, "No! Don't! We'll talk! Our boss is Zabuza Momochi!" Kakashi raised a hand and Sasuke stopped, "The Swordsman?"

The other ninja shot his brother a furious look and then sighed, "Yes, that's him. Not that it will do you any good," he added. Kakashi smiled, "Oh I don't know. The bounties on his head and the heads of every member of his team is enough to cover the rest of Mr. Tazuna's fee for the A-Rank mission this just became and then some."

The two Mist ninja suddenly looked worried, and Kakashi confirmed their fears as he turned to Naruto, "Send one of your shadow clones back to the village and tell them our client is being targeted by Zabuza Momochi, one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, and we need at least one, preferably two back up squads to deal with any additional forces he might send, as well as one squad to escort these two back to the village."

As one of the Naruto clones took off, Kakashi turned back to Tazuna, "Sorry about this Mr. Tazuna, we're going to be delayed a little while. You just became a very important client with a very profitable mission."

==Four Hours Later==

Naruto grinned, "Here they come." A few moments later a dozen leaf village shinobi came around the bend led by the clone Naruto had sent to get them. The Naruto clone promptly dispersed and Naruto grinned as he caught sight of a small black clad figure at the front of the group, his clone had gotten Hinata's team as one of the backup squads. Naruto walked over to greet them and had a hard time not running to Hinata.

As was she leapt and hugged him with delight and he enthusiastically hugged her back as the rest of the back-up team headed over to observe the two captured ninja, talk to Sakura and Sasuke, and confer with Kakashi. "I can't believe we've got a mission together!" Hinata said excitedly, her smile blotting everything else from Naruto's sight as he held her close.

"I know!" Naruto replied, "I'm gonna have to thank that grumpy old bridge builder now, if it weren't for him we wouldn't have this mission!" He kissed her and rested his forehead against hers, "I'm glad you're here." Suddenly someone tapped them on the shoulders and they turned to see a young man in brown and gray with long dark brown hair, white eyes and a neutral expression, "Are you Naruto?" Hinata squeaked nervously, "Hi Neji."

Naruto blinked, "Yeah, why?" Neji smiled, but there was no warmth in it, "My uncle Lord Hiashi wanted me to convey to you that if you act inappropriately with Hinata on this mission he'll castrate you for it." Naruto's expression went from delighted to \_"Crap..."\_ in an instant. "Neji!" Hinata exclaimed, and Neji raised an eyebrow, "Sorry Lady Hinata, orders are orders." Hinata groaned.

Naruto sighed, "Well, guess the happy reunion's over for the moment." Then he extended a hand, "So you're Neji right? Hinata's cousin? Hinata says you're good." Neji shook his hand, "I am." "Good to have you along then," Naruto declared with a smile that was only half forced, "We're going to need all the good we can get." "Why is that?" Neji asked.

Naruto jerked a thumb at the two Mist ninja in the net, "We managed to beat it out of those two that the guy who sent them is Jonin level and has at least one more with him plus his own personal hit squad. Apparently this is also a pretty big contract, so Kakashi-sensei's expecting them to bring everything they've got." Neji looked at the two bound ninja, "That explains why they sent us then." "Why?" Naruto asked.

Neji turned to him, "My team is a heavy combat squad." "Mine too!" Naruto grinned. "Perhaps we shall have to train together," Neji replied. "Since we're all on the same mission I expect we will," Naruto grinned.

A few minutes later it was decided that Squad 10 would escort the two captured ninjas back to the village, and Team 8 and Neji's team, Squad 9 would carry out the rest of the mission with Team 7.

\_Now I know what you're thinking, "Wait, they're only genin! Why have they had so many C-Rank missions already?!" The answer is simple. It makes no sense to me for functioning operatives to be taking D-ranks.

That's the sort of crap you send people in the Academy on as a learning experience. Also, Squad 7 is a Heavy Combat squad, they \_\_\*\*need\*\*\_\_ combat experience. So they get preference for C-Rank missions involving combat, such as escort jobs and eliminating low level threats, like wild animals terrorizing farms.\_

\_I'm sure you're wondering why they called for back-up. What I wonder is why in the bloody hell Kakashi, a freaking former ANBU operative, didn't bother to interrogate the captured Demon Brothers in canon to find out who sent them and who else might be coming. So I corrected that, and it makes sense to me that Kakashi, even as bad as he is and as tough as my version of Squad 7 is, Zabuza is at least an A-Rank missing nin, and Haku is by all accounts way the hell worse, not to mention the at least three more henchmen they are seen to have in canon, plus ever how many more they might have slinking around the hideout, so I think Kakashi would have the damn sense to call in some back-up, and his best friend Might Guy's squad and Squad 7's year mates with their jonin instructors are to me the obvious choices.\_

\_And I know somebody's going to go, "Wait, Hinata's wearing black? What?!" It never made a bloody lick of sense to me for the Hidden Leaf shinobi to wear such flamboyant clothes, and I know other people have asked what the hell is wrong with Naruto that he wears bright orange and doesn't even try to hide his even brighter hair. So there are numerous wardrobe changes for most characters involved. Hinata's coat is now reversible, with a black side that she wears out on missions to help her keep hidden. Neji wears brown and dark gray instead of white and beige. Naruto wears a dark orange almost brown with camouflage pattern coat and a hood. There are many other such changes and pictures of all of them can be found on my Deviantart gallery. I'm going to post a link to it on my profile page some time soon.\_

## 5. Chapter 5: The Demon of the Mist

=Chapter 5-The Demon of The Mist=

==Two Days Later==

The twelve ninjas drifted over the water through the fog silently on their water spiders, collapsible flotation devices made from rings of upturned buckets connected by wooden rods and powered by chakra, allowing them to maintain a defensive formation around the boat Tazuna was riding in. The bridge loomed out of the mist at them, the Land of Waves' only hope to break the control of the shipping magnate and mob boss Gato.

They slid silently through a tunnel and entered into a bright fog free town. The boatman pulled up to the dock, "This is as far as I go." The ninja slid ashore alongside Tazuna, silent as shadows, pulling their water spiders from the water behind them and sealing them back into the scrolls they had been summoned from. Tazuna looked around at them, he could only see about half of them, "Okay, take me home, and I mean get me there in one piece! No hanging me out as bait!" "We wouldn't dream of it Mr. Tazuna," Kurenai replied politely.

Might Guy laughed, "Don't worry Tazuna! We'll get you home so safe

you'll wonder why you were ever worried! And if anyone does try to attack you, then we'll fend 'em off and make them feel the power of youth! Right Lee?" "Yes Guy sensei!" Lee exclaimed enthusiastically, "You have no cause to worry Mr. Tazuna!"

On top of the building they had pulled up next to, Naruto raised an eyebrow at Neji's teammate Tenten, "Are they always like this?" he mouthed. Tenten nodded, an exasperated look on her face. Naruto raised an eyebrow, that was either impressive, terrifying, or appalling, he thought.

The group began to move, Neji taking point, Hinata at three o'clock, Kiba and Akamaru at nine o'clock, and Shino at six. Naruto was in between Neji and Hinata, with Sasuke across from him between Neji and Kiba, creating a balance on the front edge of the formation, three with enhanced vision, two with animal senses, and three from a heavy combat squad. Tenten and Sakura were behind Hinata and Kiba, and nobody was entirely sure where Kakashi had disappeared to, but one of his shadow clones was in the center of the formation with Tazuna, along with Kurenai, because she was good at dealing with people, and Rock Lee and Might Guy to make Tazuna as miserable as he had been making everyone else, their tremendous and inextinguishable enthusiasm clearly driving the bridge builder to distraction.

Not long after they left the collection of houses near the base of the bridge, a thick mist began to roll in. "Be on guard," Kurenai said quietly, her voice carrying clearly to the edges of the formation nevertheless. "Confirmed," Kakashi's shadow clone said, "This is Hiding in the Mist Jutsu. Fall back around the client!" Before they could move a kunai shot out of the mist and nearly hit Tazuna, only for the Kakashi clone to move and catch it on the armored back of his flak jacket, which was in fact very real, being a spare Kakashi had had on him, before pushing up his forehead protector to reveal his Sharingan.

Sasuke stared for a second as he saw his teacher's Sharingan for the first time before turning his attention back to the mission as Neji leapt into the air and kicked the immense figure dropping toward the bridge builder from above, a massive sword in hand. As the immense figure attempted to land on its feet, Lee used his "Leaf Hurricane!" and knocked his feet out from under him. As the huge figure landed, Tenten appeared above him, a javelin in her hand and then in the huge swordsman's heart. There was a sudden sound of water running and a jet of water burst up from the point of impact, like poking a hole in a water hose.

Tenten staggered back as the water in her face caught her by surprise. Before the real Zabuza could launch a kunai into her while her guard was down, or take advantage of the opening in the defensive formation around the bridge builder his water clone had opened up, he had to leap upward as something red, furry and almost as long as his sword swung at him out of the mist. He looked down in surprise, trying to figure out what had gotten so close to him, and saw that it was a figure in dark orange and brown with a long fox tail. The fox tail was what had almost gotten him, and it hit with such force it left a crater in the tree Zabuza had been crouching in front of. Another hit or two could very well have knocked the tree down. \_That would've taken my head off!\_ Zabuza thought.

Suddenly something huge came whirling towards him, looking for all

the world like the business end of an angry drill. Zabuza dodged sideways and a second one plowed into him, slamming him backwards into a tree, then through the tree, and on backwards into another tree before stopping as Zabuza, covered in deep cuts, finally managed to strike it and push it off course. Upon being struck, it turned into a surprised looking little white dog.

The little white dog fell through the air only to be caught by a shinobi in a gray coat. Before Zabuza could land, a chain wrapped around his arm, the sickle at the end whipping around to strike him in the shoulder. Then what felt like a small tree hit him in the other shoulder. Zabuza felt his collarbone shatter under the force of the immense blow as it drove him down to the ground, the chain pulling him off balance, forcing him to land badly. He had just enough time to register something bright pink rushing at him before an armored fist slammed into his unarmored solar plexus, driving the wind out of him, and sending him flying backwards into a tree hard enough to make his vision swim.

As his vision cleared he saw a bright light and heard someone yell, "CHIDORI!" then there was a crash as something huge materialized in front of him and a woman's voice called, "Demonic Crystal Ice Mirrors!" Zabuza grinned as the bright light was stopped by the wall of ice, burning through it but not breaking it or allowing its user to pass. He started pushing himself back to his feet, "Get 'em Haku, finish this job!" A moment later Haku suddenly appeared next to him, "I'll try, but they've already begun breaking my mirrors, I may not even be able to hold them, let alone stop them!"

Zabuza stared as Haku helped him up, "That's impossible! Nobody can break that jutsu!" "That's what I thought," Haku said, "but there's too many of them for me to hit them all at once, and they're being hidden from my sight by some kind of genjutsu. I can aim where they connect to my mirrors and where I hear their voices, but they're still making a lot more progress than I am. At least three of them are hitting hard enough that it's cracking my mirrors every time they connect. That jutsu I stopped from hitting you was able to punch clean through one of my mirrors in case you didn't notice, and..." Suddenly Haku dissolved into water, leaving Zabuza leaning on thin air.

He narrowly caught himself as Haku leapt out of a mirror that she'd set up behind a tree as an escape route in case she needed it, "We've been tricked! The bridge builder was a shadow clone! So were at least three of those shinobi!" She ran and caught Zabuza as the Hidden Leaf shinobi suddenly burst free of the freshly released jutsu. Before they could engage the two assassins, Haku made a hand sign and they disappeared.

Kurenai spoke into her com link as Neji gave the all-clear signal while the mist cleared with Zabuza's departure, "Kakashi? Kurenai. Did you get the bridge builder to his home safely?" "We just walked in," Kakashi replied, "Safe and sound, without a single hiccup. Zabuza took the bait?" "He did," Kurenai replied, "We would've had him, but his friend with the Ice Release was here too and got him out before we could finish him. She's got some kind of ice jutsu that traps her opponents and makes her so fast even Neji had a hard time keeping track of her. She wasn't able to penetrate his defense though, just like Guy said she wouldn't, and between Guy, Lee and Sakura we were able to break enough of her mirrors to keep her from

turning us all into pincushions."

"As is," she continued, "I think everyone but Neji's got at least two or three needles stuck in them, Naruto's got a lot in his tail from covering Sakura while she tried to clear an escape route, and Sasuke's got a lot in him too. We're going to be held up a little while administering first aid and making sure none of the needles were poisoned. We should be there in about an hour. Keep an eye out, Guy was able to land a hit on Zabuza, so Zabuza probably won't be using that sword arm of his for a while, but there's still that ice girl and whoever else is on their team."

"We'll keep an eye out," Kakashi replied, "Good work everyone. See you in an hour." He turned to Tazuna with a smile, "See Mr. Tazuna? I told you he'd fall for it." "Are Naruto and Neji okay? My Shadow Clone broke before I could make sure." Hinata asked from where she was keeping watch on the porch. "They all sound to be just fine," Kakashi told her with a smile.

"You know Naruto wouldn't let himself die without kissing you goodbye first," Shino added calmly from where he was seated in a meditative position, calmly listening to his bugs as they kept up a running report on the activities in the forest. Hinata smiled and turned back to the water she was watching, "Yeah, you're right. Thanks Shino." Shino smiled behind his high collar and turned back to his task.

==That Afternoon==

Teams Guy and Kakashi stood in a clearing near Tazuna's house while Team Kurenai kept watch around the house. They were taking it in shifts to train and keep watch, so now Kakashi and Guy looked at the line of their students before them and compared notes about who should train with who. Guy rested his chin on one hand, "You say Sakura has the greatest physical strength and chakra control?"

"That's right," Kakashi replied, "I was thinking she should train with Neji or Lee." Guy nodded, "Yes a valid point. However she wouldn't really be able to use Gentle Fist without the Byakugan, so should we put her with Lee to improve her taijutsu? With the raw strength at her disposal she could be quite a force to be reckoned with if trained as a hand to hand fighter." Kakashi nodded, "Good idea. Okay, Sakura and Lee pair off, you two are going to be working on your taijutsu." Guy pointed at Lee, "Lee, show Sakura how to put all that youthful strength into her blows and utilize every ounce of her power."

Lee saluted, "Yes Guy sensei! Come Sakura, we shall practice our taijutsu until our blows are strong enough to defeat even the strongest opponents!" Sakura found herself being dragged along behind Lee as he hurried away to pick an unfortunate tree to practice on. \_Oh please just don't make me wear one of those jumpsuits...\_ Sakura thought, as well as, \_Kakashi-sensei, why are you doing this to me? Why couldn't you have paired me with Tenten?\_ Sasuke watched them go with an expression that spoke of internally mounting jealousy, but really he was thinking, \_I bet one of those jumpsuits would show off Sakura's figure really well...I wonder if she'd try one on...\_

He was pulled from his thoughts as Kakashi said, "Sasuke, you're with

Tenten for weapons practice." Sasuke blinked, "Weapons practice?" Tenten grinned, "Ok, what do you want me to teach him? Swords? Sickles and chain? Staff? Knife work?" She inspected Sasuke so closely that Sakura might well have had a jealous meltdown had Lee not been occupying the entirety of her attention. Sasuke was slightly uncomfortable as Tenten went about her examination, lifting his arms and poking them, jabbing a finger at his face to test his reflexes, examining his hand very thoroughly and measuring the length of his arms.

After a moment she pulled out a scroll and laid it on the ground, pressing her hands to two seals. An instant later there was a puff of smoke and a pair of sickle and chain weapons popped out. She smiled as she handed him one, "Looks like you get sickle and chain." Sasuke took it and looked at it like it was from outer space, prompting Tenten to frown at him, "Hey don't give it that look!"

"The sickle and chain was designed for taking out samurai, master swordsmen, very well armored master swordsmen at that. If there's any weapon I'd use against Zabuza, this would be it. Besides, it's good enough for Hanzo of the Hidden Rain, and he's one of the most powerful ninja in the world!" Sasuke blinked at her and then smiled as he remembered that Itachi used a sword, "Then let's get started."

Meanwhile Guy had gone to assist Lee in tutoring Sakura in taijutsu and Kakashi was teaching Neji and Naruto in the center of the clearing, "Well it looks like you two are stuck with me." He scratched his head, "Now what should I teach you?" He looked at them, "You're both hand to hand fighters, and you both have impressive chakra reserves, hmm..." He smiled suddenly, "I know!" He suddenly fished out some little sheets of paper, "Chakra paper." He grinned behind his mask, "Once I know which elemental affinities you have, I'll know what techniques to teach you!"

He handed them each one, "Run your chakra through the paper and it'll tell us what element you have." He raised a sheet between his fingers and it wrinkled tremendously, "For example I've got lightning, which makes the paper wrinkle. If you've got wind chakra, the paper will split. Earth will make the paper crumble, water will make it soggy, and if you've got fire, which is common in the Land of Fire, the paper will ignite and burn. Neji, you go first."

Neji frowned at the paper and a moment later it flopped over and dripped, "Water." Kakashi nodded, "Yes, definitely water. Okay Naruto, your turn." Naruto frowned at his paper and concentrated for a moment, willing his chakra to extend out past his fingertips. The paper wrinkled and tore in the middle, the two jagged edges looking faintly like the zigzag of a lightning bolt. Naruto frowned, "Does that mean I got a double?" Kakashi stared and then smiled, "Yes it does. You inherited your father's du-AH!"

The paper had suddenly exploded into flames with the power of a miniature paper bomb as the nine-tailed fox's chakra suddenly surged through Naruto's fingers, as though demanding to be recognized. Naruto, Neji and Kakashi all leapt back from the sudden burst of fire. Kakashi blinked and quickly regained his composure, carrying on as though nothing had happened, "As I was saying, you have inherited your father's dual natured chakra, both lightning and wind, and it appears your house guest has very powerful fire chakra."

"So in addition to your father's Thunder Release," Kakashi continued, "you likely also have extremely powerful Fire Release when you tap into that spare chakra." Neji stared at Naruto, "House guest?" Then his eyes lit on Naruto's tail and it clicked. He stared in shock for a moment while he found his voice, "\_\*\*YOU'RE THE NINE TAILED FOX?!\*\*\_" He clapped his hands to the sides of his head, "\_\*\*LADY HINATA'S DATING THE NINE TAILED FOX?! DOES LORD HIASHI KNOW ABOUT THIS?!\*\*\_"

Everyone else stopped and stared as Naruto calmly blinked at him, "Yes, yes and yes. Don't worry, I have an understanding with the fox and he's sealed very well. I am perfectly safe to be around, so just calm down. Hinata and Lord Hiashi know, Hinata doesn't care, and Lord Hiashi's always known and he still lets me see Hinata. They don't worry about it, and neither does anyone else who knows, so neither should you."

Neji tried to formulate some form of protest, but whatever he would have come up with withered in the face of Naruto and Kakashi's calm gaze. After a moment he nodded, "Alright, let's continue." Naruto turned back to Kakashi, "So I've got my dad's Thunder Release and the Fox's Fire. How do I use it?" Kakashi smiled behind his mask, "Well, I have lightning chakra as well, so I think a lightning jutsu would be the best option for me to teach you, especially since we're going up against water users."

Naruto nodded with a smile, "Right. Whatcha got?" Kakashi scratched his head, "Hmm, I wish I could teach you your father's teleportation technique, but honestly even I'm not entirely sure how it works. I could teach you my signature technique the Lightning Cutter, but that doesn't really seem like you, so for now, let's just stick to infusing your chakra with its nature elements and then you can experiment and see what you come up with."

Naruto nodded, "Alright." Kakashi nodded, "I may not be able to use your father's techniques, but I understand well enough how they worked thanks to my Sharingan. So to start, gather your chakra in your hands." Naruto nodded and did so after focusing for a moment. Kakashi nodded, "Good, now try to make a spark of electricity. You're good at transformations, you should be able to do this without too much trouble."

Electricity started jumping around Naruto's fingers as he smiled, "Yeah. Grandpa taught me how to use the wind half already, so..." He raised his other hand and air started to swirl around it. Kakashi raised an eyebrow, "\_Grandpa? Is he talking about...\_" Suddenly Naruto turned and tilted his hands towards each other. The lightning suddenly began jumping between his palms and wind started to whirl amidst the tiny lightning bolts. Kakashi and Neji had just enough time to be surprised before, "\_\*\*BOOM!\*\*\_"

A massive thunderclap made everyone within two or three miles stop and look at the sky wondering if it was going to rain, and it set the Leaf shinobi's ears ringing. Naruto staggered backwards clutching his ears, "AH!" Kakashi straightened up, "Yep," he said, then he repeated himself louder because he couldn't hear himself, "YES! THAT WAS THUNDER RELEASE!" The ground jumped suddenly and Kakashi turned to see the smoldering remains of three trees that looked like they had been struck by lightning and a giant axe at the same time, none of

which had been small, all hitting the ground simultaneously.

Naruto finally managed to blink the stars from his eyes, "WHOA! DID I DO THAT?!" Kakashi patted him on the head, "Yes you did!" He said loudly, "Now the next thing I want you to work on, is \_AIM!\_"

\_Now, I'm sure you have many questions. Yes, Zabuza got his butt seriously handed to him by the Hidden Leaf shinobi and had to have Haku get him out. Why you ask? Because he lost to Squad 7 in canon and needed Haku to bail him out. This means he wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance against three jonin and nine of my versions genin, which are all considerably better at what they do. You are probably also wondering how Kakashi identified Hiding in the Mist Jutsu so quickly as well. Kakashi has had a lot of experience fighting Hidden Mist ninja, and because he was expecting Zabuza, he had his shadow clone keep an eye out.\_

\_You might also be wondering about Haku. Yes, Haku is a girl in mine. Why? Because I think Kishimoto is a troll and Haku was actually a girl all along. Also it will fit with the rest of the story better this way. Just trust me on that.\_

\_I expect you are also wondering about the last section of this chapter where the squads divide up to train, letting the older more experienced Team Guy tutor Team Kakashi. I put Sakura with Lee and Guy because it sets Lee up to develop his crush on her (I don't know why since she's already with Sasuke, I just felt like it) and because Sakura naturally has the raw strength to keep up with Lee and Guy's taijutsu, so I think she should learn from them.\_

\_I put Sasuke with Tenten because I felt that with Sasuke's lean build, speed and Sharingan accuracy, he would be better suited to armed combat. I picked the sickle and chain because as explained in the chapter, Itachi used a sword, and more pressingly so does Zabuza. Sickle and chain weapons are renowned for being used against armored sword wielding foes (samurai) to great effect, so it makes sense to me for Sasuke to learn to use them as they are an extremely effective countermeasure for dealing with swords. Also, with his Sharingan accuracy, he can attain accuracy and proficiency with the medium and long ranged uses of this weapon much more quickly than an average user.\_

\_I'm sure you're also wondering about "Thunder Release". This is because I feel that Minato should have had Lightning Release due to being the Yellow Flash, and having one of his signature techniques be the Flying Raijin teleportation jutsu. So, Minato is now double natured, and Naruto inherited that double Wind/Lightning nature, which given that it never appeared in canon, I have dubbed Thunder Release. I'm sure you're wondering why and how that thunderclap worked as well. The answer is simple: Thunder is the result of superheating air in clouds via lightning, so to combine lightning with wind (air) would make thunder. So to combine wind and lightning natured chakra would logically create a very loud thunderclap loaded with cutting and burning energy. Since Naruto wasn't really aiming, and simply angled his hands towards each other in the direction he wanted the energy to go, there was a considerable backlash. Once he learns how to aim, most of the sound will be focused toward his target along with the full cutting and scorching power of the mixed lightning and wind release. Yes, he did overdo it considerably because he wasn't aware of how much power the Thunder Release could

cut loose.\_

\_The Nine Tails has Fire Release because its chakra has been repeatedly described as fiery.\_

\_I'm sure you're also wondering who he's talking about when he says Grandpa. Well, "My godfather" is just too much of a mouthful, and let's face it, Jiraiya is old. Yes, Jiraiya has been doing a better job upholding his duties as Naruto's godfather in this version and taught Naruto quite a lot. This is at least part of the reason why Naruto is now a better shinobi than in canon, and hangs around the Hokage so much.\_

\_I am also updating the shinobi arsenal and tool kit to include actual ninja tools, such as the Water Spider, a flotation device which while unreplicated and unproven in our world, might very well work with the application of chakra in Naruto-verse.\_

## 6. Chapter 6: The Battle of The Bridge

=Chapter 6-The Battle Of The Bridge=

==Sunrise, Four Days Later==

Lee woke from his slumber at the training grounds and sat up. He looked around bleary eyed and blinked before yawning widely, "Morning already?" He rose and stumbled off towards Tazuna's house, only to round the tree and find that many of the others were sleeping around the training ground too. Lee smiled as he saw Guy sleeping on the other side of the tree he had been leaned against, \_That explains why he did not drag me inside after I fell asleep like he normally does\_ Lee thought. Then he frowned, \_But normally Tenten and Neji would drag both of us in...\_

He looked around and a moment later spotted Tenten curled under a blanket, her sickle and chain still less than arm's reach away. He smiled as he realized Neji must have gone to take over watch at the house. Kiba was sprawled not far away with Akamaru on his back, both of them snoring in unison, and Naruto and Hinata were cuddled together under a blanket at the base of another tree.

"So you're awake," Shino said from behind Lee. Lee jumped half the height of the nearest tree in surprise. He landed, "Oh good morning Shino. Please do not sneak up behind me like that." Shino's expression didn't noticeably change, although given how much of his face was covered up, it would've been hard to tell. "It's good that you're awake," Shino said, "Now we can go get some breakfast before we wake the others up. Kiba and Akamaru always whine when there is not food readily available when he wakes up. It's kind of odd when you consider that they do most of our team's hunting."

Lee nodded, "You are right, that is strange. How could he expect there to be food when he has not gotten any and he is the one responsible for bringing it? You are also right that we should go get breakfast for our friends. They were obviously very tired after last night's training." Shino nodded and they headed back to Tazuna's house. Twenty minutes later they headed back, a massive pack of food on Lee's back. Shino had offered to help carry some of it, but Lee had insisted on carrying it himself.

"It is very kind of Miss Tsunami to provide food for us," Lee remarked, "Given how poor the people are here, it cannot be an easy burden for them to bear. Even a single squad would more than double the number of people she has to feed." Shino looked at him, "We have been hunting some you know, and I know Kurenai sensei has been paying for our meals. I suspect Guy sensei and Kakashi sensei have as well. You are correct though, it is quite nice."

"Yes it is," Lee agreed. They walked in silence for a few moments and then they found a young woman in pink kneeling on the grass in front of them, picking herbs. "Excuse me Miss," Lee said unprompted, "Are you in need of any assistance?" The girl turned around to look at them and her eyes widened in surprise as she leapt up. Lee stared as he realized she was very beautiful and Shino raised his hands in a non-threatening manner, "Please, do not be alarmed, we only want to help."

The girl blinked and then smiled, "Well I'm gathering herbs, I suppose you could help with that if you'd like." Shino nodded, "Of course, we would be glad to." "Yes!" Lee agreed enthusiastically, "We will assist you! What kind of herbs are we looking for?" The girl smiled and held up one from her basket, "Well I pick several, but if you could help me find some more of these I'd be grateful." Lee strode closer for a better look and then quickly declared he would find as many as he could before bending over and crawling around on his hands and knees searching, picking the specified herbs every time he found them.

Shino moved slightly slower and quickly identified the herb, as well as several others in the young woman's basket, "I see, you're collecting medicinal herbs. I will see if I can collect some as well. Please, do not be alarmed." "By what?" The girl asked. Shino pointed his sleeve away from Lee and a dark buzzing mass oozed out into the air before scattering across the small clearing. Shino turned back to the girl, "My insects will find and retrieve the herbs Lee doesn't know to look for. May I ask what you are collecting medicine for?"

The girl blinked and then nodded, a slightly sad look in her eye, "My, brother, hurt his shoulder recently. He insists he has to work, but he can't with his shoulder like it is, it hurts him too much. I've convinced him to put his arm in a sling so that maybe he won't hurt himself anymore, but he insists that he has to return to work today. So I'm gathering ingredients to help ease the pain so that he can work without hurting too much."

"I see," Shino replied as his mass of insects came flying back to him, a double handful of herbs in tow. Lee walked back up, "Here are the herbs you requested." The girl smiled as he laid the herbs in her basket, "Thank you both, you just gave me half an hour to make sure I get the medicine right." She rose, "Before I go, are you two ninja?" "We are," Shino and Lee replied at the same time. "So, you two must be part of the party guarding the bridge while it's being finished?" "That's right," Lee replied, "Does your brother work on the bridge?"

The girl smiled, "Yes, you could say that." Her expression turned puzzled, "May I ask why you are doing this? Protecting the bridge and helping this land?" "Because we were hired to," Shino replied, "And

because we cannot in good conscience allow the corruption poisoning this land to continue." The girl smiled, "I see. Well, thank you again for the herbs. I'm sure we'll see each other again sometime." Lee bowed slightly as Shino stood and bowed as well. "Have a nice day Miss," Lee said, "I hope your brother recovers well."

The girl smiled as she turned to walk off, "I'm sure he will, he's not the sort to let a little thing like a bad shoulder stop him." She took two steps and then paused and looked over her shoulder, "Oh by the way, I'm a guy." She walked off as Lee stared in shocked disbelief. He looked at Shino and before he could say anything Shino patted him on the shoulder, "It's alright Lee, she was pulling your leg." The tension of disbelief went out of Lee in an instant and his ever present smile returned, "Oh, that makes much more sense. I am glad you caught that Shino." Shino smiled behind his high collar, "That's what friends are for."

==The Next Day==

Hinata, Naruto, and Lee got house watch duty for the day. The Jonin had agreed that there always needed to be at least three ninja at the house in case Zabuza tried to abduct Tazuna's family for leverage. So now they waved to their friends as the rest of the team took off with Tazuna heading for the bridge.

When they got to the bridge, they found all of Tazuna's workers all at least badly injured, and many so still those present could only assume them dead. "Wha-what is this?!" Tazuna exclaimed, "What happened?!" "Everyone on guard!" Kakashi barked, "He's here!" "He?" Zabuza chuckled as the mist began to roll in with astonishing speed, "You really think I'm arrogant enough to try this again with one arm and no backup?"

As the mist rolled over them, half a dozen Zabuza's suddenly appeared and slashed at Neji, Sasuke, Kiba, Kakashi, Shino and Kurenai with their copies of Zabuza's massive sword. Before any of them could connect, the Leaf Shinobi lashed out lightning quick and broke the clones. Sakura shrieked as an arm wrapped around her throat, kunai in hand. Her hands flew up and latched onto Zabuza's arm, her strength actually great enough that Zabuza wasn't able to move the arm he had planned to cut her throat with.

That didn't stop him from stabbing her in the back with the hand poking out of his sling and disappearing back into the mist as she crumpled, crying out in shock and pain. Zabuza called through the mist, "Haku! Break em up!" "Demonic Crystal Ice Mirror Maze!" Walls of ice crystals suddenly erupted around the Hidden Leaf Shinobi, breaking them into smaller groups. A form in a brown robe and the mask of a Hidden Mist Hunter Nin suddenly appeared in all the mirrors.

Guy had been isolated from the others, and Haku struck at him first, only to be repulsed by a sudden mini-cyclone of chakra, "Eight Trigrams Palms Revolving Heaven!" Haku was blasted back through her own mirror with sufficient force to break it as the real Guy connected with the other side of the mirror. Haku tried to push herself upright as her ice mirrors shattered, "What?! But how?" Guy's form suddenly flickered and revealed it to be Neji who smiled triumphantly, "And now, Eight Trigrams Sixty Four Palms!"

He lunged with lightning speed and only narrowly managed to duck and avoid being cut in half by the real Zabuza's sword. As was, Haku still managed to put half a dozen needles into his inner thigh and he collapsed. Before Zabuza could finish him with a tremendous overhead blow, the chain of Tenten's sickle and chain wrapped around his hand and yanked him backwards as Sasuke swept the immense swordsman's feet out from under him. Haku managed to roll and avoid being squashed by Zabuza's immense form, but before Zabuza could get loose, Guy had trodden on his hands and snatched his sword away.

Zabuza's eyes widened as he heard Kakashi call, "Lightning Cutter!" And saw a bright light appear above his head. He rolled and Kakashi's hand landed next to him. Zabuza had just enough time to see that Kakashi was actually just holding a flare before Kakashi jabbed it into his face. Zabuza reared back and yanked the chain holding him out of Tenten's grip, lashing it like a whip and forcing Kakashi back before untangling his hand and readying himself to use the new weapon.

Meanwhile Kurenai had cast a cloaking genjutsu around herself, Sakura and Tazuna while she quickly applied first aid to the wound in Sakura's back that was gushing blood quite alarmingly, and the others were busily fighting off Zabuza's hit squad. Kiba and Akamaru were viciously dueling with a massive ninja who was trying desperately to ward them off with a chain net and javelin. Shino calmly decked a ninja who found his clothes filled with bugs and turned to see where his assistance would be most useful next and casually sent a small swarm of insects up the shirt of the sword wielding ninja Tenten was dueling.

The enemy ninja's concentration was immediately thrown out the window as dozens of insects began biting him furiously. That was all the opening Tenten needed to take her opponents feet out from under him with her double hook swords and switch them out for a heavy spiked ball that she brought thundering down on the enemy ninja's torso. There was a sickeningly meaty thud and the enemy ninja stopped moving as Tenten pulled back her chain mace and whirled it.

They saw Sasuke trying desperately to melt the ice mirror cage Haku had trapped Neji in and Tenten called for him to back up as she charged the spot he had been torching. She brought the heavy metal weight around with everything she had and the mirror shattered. Neji bolted out through the opening, a flurry of needles suddenly connecting with the ground where he had been standing, "Thanks Tenten!"

The ice cage suddenly collapsed in on itself and reformed into a wall of ice spears that suddenly rocketed towards the group of Leaf shinobi. They braced themselves for impact in the split second they had and then, "RAIJIN SCYTHE!" \*\*BOOM!\*\* The ice spears suddenly shattered as Naruto landed, his tail lashing with vicious delight. He looked over his shoulder at them, "You guys started the party without me?"

Sasuke clapped him on the shoulder, "Good to see you." "Are Lady Hinata and the bridge builder's family alright?" Neji demanded. Naruto smirked and pointed, "See for yourself." Haku suddenly collapsed as a tiny black figure sprung away from behind her. Hinata bounced over to them as Lee appeared seemingly from nowhere and swept Zabuza's feet from under him, allowing Kakashi and Guy to duck around

his guard and deliver a devastating double punch to the deadly swordsman.

Kakashi snatched Zabuza's sword away from him and Guy delivered a devastating drop kick to the already badly off balance assassin, knocking him twenty feet backwards into a pile of I-beams. Kakashi was on him in an instant, laying Zabuza's own sword to his throat, "It's over Zabuza." The mist started dissipating as Zabuza bowed his head in acknowledgement of his defeat. Just as the assembled Leaf ninja were about to cheer their victory, a huge force suddenly slammed them all flat and held them there.

Footsteps echoed through the dissipating mist and Naruto saw a pair of boots stride past him. The figure walked off past him, then walked back closer. A moment later the force was lifted as a voice called, "Let's all just calm down shall we?" Naruto picked himself up and saw an armored figure wearing a mask like Haku's but with a different design standing over Kakashi, Guy and Zabuza, Zabuza's sword casually on his shoulder. The figure looked down at Zabuza, "Zabuza Momochi, your contract has been rendered void by the extermination of Mr. Gato." Zabuza sat bolt upright, "WHAT?! I JUST TALKED TO HIM HALF AN HOUR AGO!"

The figure pointed towards the end of the bridge with Zabuza's sword as though it didn't weigh a thing. Everyone looked and was stunned to see a mass of bodies at the end of the bridge, a short man with dark glasses and white hair impaled on some kind of spear held partially upright above the gruesome pile. "Gato was planning to kill you rather than pay you Zabuza," the masked figure stated bluntly, "I showed him and his thugs the error of their ways."

Zabuza stared, even for him, that was no small pile of bodies. Then he looked at the masked figure, "What do you want?" The figure plucked a scroll from a pocket of his flak jacket and offered it to Zabuza, "Zabuza Momochi, by direct order of the Mizukage, you are being offered reinstatement as one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist." All present stared and then Zabuza growled, "I'm nobody's lap dog, especially that idiots!"

There was a note of irritation in the masked figure's voice, "I strongly recommend you read your reinstatement orders. There's a new Mizukage who sent me to get you specifically." Zabuza swatted the scroll away, "I don't care who it is I'm not-" He got no further as the masked figure beheaded him with his own blade in an instant. "I really hate having to repeat myself," The masked figure said irritably as he tucked the scroll back into his pouch. It had taken a second for what had just happened to sink in, then Haku screamed, "ZABUZAAAAA!"

She launched herself at the masked figure, needles ready to kill, and suddenly stopped midair, just floating there as the masked man turned to her, his eyes glowing a pale purple, "Haku of the Ice?" He strode forward and plucked her mask off, revealing the girl Lee and Shino had spoken with the day before, her face stricken with rage and grief. They stared as they realized they had aided and abetted an enemy unwittingly, then the masked figure continued, "You are also being reinstated by order of the Mizukage, and I'm afraid you really don't get a choice in the matter. We require your kekkai genkai. Your cooperation is not necessary."

"I'll kill you!" Haku hissed angrily as she struggled against the mysterious force holding her frozen in the air. The masked figure sighed, "No you won't." He proceeded to step closer and his hand suddenly glowed with chakra as he snapped a hand into a nerve center and knocked Haku soundly unconscious. He proceeded to quickly tie her up before setting her down and turning to the Leaf ninja, "Sorry for interrupting your hunt, I had my orders."

"I'm afraid protocol states that I'm not allowed to let you keep the bodies, but I will ensure the bounties for these missing nin are paid to the Hidden Leaf." "How do we know we can trust you?" Guy asked skeptically. The masked figure seemed to smile, "Why Guy, if I hadn't been willing to ensure you were compensated, I would have simply killed you all." Guy blinked and started to protest until Kakashi sighed, "Calm down Guy, he's doing his job, just like we're doing ours. He's right, he could have killed us all just now. He let us live, he probably doesn't mean us any harm."

The masked figure had a smile in his voice, "See Guy? Kakashi knows I'm on your side. Don't worry, I have a little influence with the new Mizukage, I'll make sure you get your bounty. I have a feeling the Land of Waves wouldn't be able to cover this mission otherwise." He chuckled as he slid Zabuza's sword through a strap on his back, lifted Haku's bound form over his shoulder and manifested several shadow clones, "Who knows? Maybe they'll even send me to deliver the money myself."

The shadow clones set about lifting Zabuza's body and his unconscious hit squad as the masked figure continued, "If not, as I said, rest assured, you will receive payment for the elimination of Zabuza and his team." Kakashi smiled, "Well that is very generous of you, but may I ask why you are being so generous?" The masked figure's voice took a more ominous tone, "There are storm clouds gathering Kakashi Hatake, soon we will all need allies. I prefer to make friends now rather than in the thick of battle."

Then he was suddenly cheerful again, "So have a nice day, and enjoy the rest of your time in the Land of Waves. It should be quite peaceful from here on, oh and I hope that little pink haired kunoichi over there recovers well." Kurenai's eyes widened in shock as she realized the masked figure with the glowing eyes had seen straight through her genjutsu. Then Sakura groaned and as Kurenai looked, she saw that the masked figure had healed her wound. The masked figure bowed and then straightened and waved goodbye, "Tata." He then jumped nearly a mile over the end of the bridge to the mainland, his shadow clones all right behind him.

"Did you see what I saw?" Kakashi asked Guy. Guy nodded, "Yes, but it's hard to believe. I thought it had died out." "So did I," Kakashi replied as he pushed his forehead protector back down over his eye, "But there's no mistaking that." "What is it Guy-sensei?" Lee asked. "The Land of Water's equivalent of the Byakugan and Sharingan," Guy replied, "One of the most dangerous, rare and powerful kekkai genkai ever seen, \_the Rinnegan.\_"

==Half an Hour Later, Many Miles Away==

The masked figure set down Haku and the shadow clones dropped Zabuza's unconscious flunkies and set Zabuza's corpse down beside Haku. The masked figure casually drew four kunai and killed each of

the four ninjas after making sure Haku couldn't see. Then he pushed his mask up and his hands flashed through an activation sequence, "Fire style! Fireball Jutsu!" He exhaled and set the four fresh corpses alight. He smiled, "That's good, I'm gonna have to remember that one!"

He pushed his mask back down and walked around in front of Haku, turning and sitting down to face her. He pulled out a scroll and a kunai, quickly slashing the ropes holding Haku before offering her the scroll, "Haku of the Ice, you are hereby being offered reinstatement by order of the Mizukage." Haku glared at him coldly, her pretty face hardened by rage.

The masked figure told her coldly, "Read the scroll Haku. Don't make Zabuza's mistake and think I'll tell you a third time." Haku snatched the scroll out of his open hand and read it, her eyes roving the page, confirming it was indeed an official document, then she got to the name at the end and her heart skipped several beats, "\_That's\_ the new Mizukage?!" "You see why we weren't worried about Zabuza trying another coup," the mask figure said smoothly.

"Now then," he continued, "You have a choice to make." Haku looked at him warily. "You can either come back willingly, and you will be allowed your freedom. You will be allowed to continue practicing ninjutsu, and you will keep all your limbs." Haku's eyes widened as the masked figure continued, "Or alternatively, you can resist. If that is your choice, I will carry out the unpleasant task of ensuring you never make another hand sign or walk again before I drag you back and we toss you into a lab to harvest your bloodline talent and you never see the light of day again."

He suddenly shed his mask, allowing Haku to see the three ringed Rinnegan behind it, "And just between you and me Haku, if I were you, I'd go willingly rather than try to fight a stage three Rinnegan." Haku gulped. Even stage one Rinnegan users were legendarily dangerous, a stage three was considered Kage level power. The Rinnegan user put his mask back on, "Now then, let's bury Zabuza and you can think it over while we do."

==An Hour Later==

The Rinnegan user looked at Zabuza's grave, "So Haku, what is your decision?" Haku didn't answer for a minute, then, "I will accept my reinstatement and return to the Village Hidden in the Mist." The Rinnegan user suddenly wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into a hug. She blinked in surprise but before she could protest, "I know it hurts Haku. Leaving an old life with someone you cared about behind always does, but the pain will fade with time."

He stepped back, and even though Haku couldn't see it through his mask, she knew he was smiling, "There's a new life waiting for you Haku, let's get you to it." Haku smiled as the tears finally broke free, "Okay, let's go." She turned to Zabuza's grave, "Goodbye Zabuza, and thank you, for everything." Then she turned and bounded away behind the Rinnegan user, wondering what the new Mizukage had in store for her.

END OF VOLUME 1

\_Teamwork boys and girls! It shall not be lacking here! Once again,

some actual ninja tactics giving tremendous advantage to those who use them. What do you do when one arm is caught? Strike with the other one. What do you do when your foes outnumber you? Break them up. What do you do when your opponent knows your team members strengths and weaknesses? Switch places. How do you defeat an opponent much bigger and stronger than you when he is as skilled or possibly far more than you are? You call in a friend or five.\_

\_Yes, I think Lee would fall for Haku's leg pull about being a guy every bit as much as Naruto did in canon. Lee is just too straightforward, honest and trusting for that joke to not work on him. Shino could tell she was joking because his bugs have much better senses and can identify male or female. \_

\_I'm sure you're also wondering why Neji didn't at least haul Tenten inside after everyone passed out training. The answer is that he passed out too. Naruto woke him up for his turn at watch and brought the girls blankets. For those wondering how the watch schedule goes, it is Hinata, Kiba, Kakashi, Naruto, Neji, Shino, Sasuke, Kurenai. These shinobi all possess extreme reconnaissance potential due to their gifts, and thus are the prime candidates to serve watch. They are ordered this way so that the senses and skills are alternated as much as possible so that no method of concealment will work for long due to the variety of methods of detection.\_

\_Since you're probably wondering, Tazuna's family was stashed at a family friend's house while Naruto, Hinata and Lee were on their way to the bridge so that any follow up attempts to abduct them would find the house deserted.\_

\_Yes, Naruto has now learned how to aim and control his Thunder Release by dialing back the amount of energy he superheats the air with and only charging it in one hand. His new attack is called \_\_\*\*Raijin Scythe\*\*\_\_ because he holds his hand in a curve to use it, not only helping to put the blast where he wants it, but also reducing the amount of air he's superheating. The more he curls his hand, the more powerful the technique is.\_

\_Yes, the Rinnegan is now a Kekkaiki Genkai completely unrelated to either the Sharingan or the now removed Sage of Six Paths. The Rinnegan still has the same powers, but they are now obtained in a certain order evidenced by how many rings the Rinnegan has. For example a stage one would only have one ring and be the equivalent of the Byakugan with the Rinnegan chakra absorption ability, which essentially cancels out any chakra based attack and allows the user to instead feed off the energy, replenishing their stamina and healing them. All Rinnegan powers now have a basis in chakra manipulation. If the user pays attention and has a good memory, it can even allow jutsu copying like a Sharingan. More on the new workings of the Rinnegan to come as the story progresses.\_

\_Yes, Haku is still alive. Yes, there is a new Mizukage who Zabuza probably would have felt no shame in working for if he had actually read the scroll. However, I figured he would be too stubborn, and at that point too cranky to accept any offer made to him, and Hattori, the masked man with the Rinnegan, really does hate having to repeat himself. So Zabuza is now dead. I'm sure you're wondering why Hattori buried Zabuza instead of cremating him. The answer is quite simply that it was a gesture of good faith to work towards winning Haku over.\_

\_The Village Hidden in the Leaves received payment in full for the extermination of Zabuza and his entire team two weeks later. The amount was enough to pay for two A-Rank Missions as Zabuza's bounty alone covered the cost of the mission to capture him, and his team was enough for another A-Rank. The Land of Waves was promptly reimbursed for the C-Rank they had paid for as a subtle way to ensure they would always come to the Hidden Leaf for shinobi services, and subsequently the Land of Waves began to thrive again. The bridge the Leaf shinobi had worked so hard to protect was later named the Great Leaf Bridge.\_

\_Hattori's healing took perfectly and Sakura was up walking around a few days later although she was still a bit fragile for a week or two from the blood loss and wasn't back up to her usual strength for almost a month. However, Sasuke fretted over her like a mother hen the whole time, so she didn't particularly mind. Sasuke did after about two week's worth of bribing and cajolery, talk her into trying on one of Guy and Lee's jumpsuits. She immediately freaked out because he fainted from the nose bleed it gave him. She later smugly remarked to Ino about how funny it was that he had tried so hard to get her into that jumpsuit and now all he wanted was to get her out of it.\_

\_Upon learning of the Mist nin Hattori's words, and later upon the delivery of his guarantee, the Hokage felt a sense of deep unease settle in his gut as he wondered just exactly how dark the storm clouds that had led to such a gesture must be, and how powerful the new Mizukage must be to have been able to rally the numerous and treacherous factions of the Mist Village for such a bold and grand gesture on the word of a single ninja.\_

## 7. Chapter 6,5: Extra Scene: Haku & Hattori

"Why are we taking a boat to Hidden Rain?" Haku asked as the masked man led her towards a large nearby inn. "Because," he answered, "That's where I'm from. I'd rather not discuss the particulars until we're inside and I've had a chance to erect a silence barrier if you don't mind. My mask can only do so much." Haku nodded, the seals carved into the inside of Hunter Nin masks could make any casual observer totally overlook anyone wearing one, but they didn't hold up against intense scrutiny, and there was no telling who might be listening.

They strode in and she shed her mask as he did, the innkeeper stared at his eyes briefly but was quickly distracted by the medium-sized coin pouch he placed on the counter. "I want your best room and dinner brought up to us, the best food you can get and a lot of it. You may keep the change, but I'll be expecting first class service." The innkeeper looked at him like he was out of his mind and then opened the pouch. The innkeeper's eyes nearly popped out of his head before he closed the pouch, "Yessir! At once sir! Let me show you to your room sir!"

A moment later the innkeeper was cheerfully bowing them into the large comfortable room at the end of the second floor hallway, "There is a private bathroom on your right, and dinner will be served just as soon as we can get it fixed. Please let us know if there's anything you need, anything at all. I do hope you enjoy your stay sir

and madam." The formerly masked man nodded, "Thank you. That'll be all." The innkeeper quickly ducked out and closed the door behind him.

As soon as it closed the masked man moved to the door and locked it before quickly erecting a silence barrier around the perimeter of the room. He strode over to the bed and quickly clambered over to the middle of it before sitting upright and tracing out a seal on the covers with his chakra. He motioned Haku over onto the bed with him. She blushed slightly and then climbed onto the bed with him. She faced him as he reached around her to finish the additional barrier.

"Now we can talk," he declared as he sat back, "In answer to your question, we are going to Hidden Rain because Hidden Rain and Hidden Mist are moving towards unification under my father." Haku tilted her head slightly in confusion, "Who is your father?" The man grinned, "I am Hattori Hanzo, son of Hanzo of the Salamander, the new Master of Hidden Rain and recently commissioned leader of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. I came to recruit you because one of the seven blades is meant to be yours by birthright."

Haku sat back in surprise, "What?" Hattori nodded, "It's a terrible shame what happened to Hidden Mist's noble clans. Only a handful have survived. You are the last living heir to the Yuki clan, and as such are the only one capable of truly wielding Tsurara, the only one of the seven blades still in the possession of Hidden Mist. Two now that we've retrieved the Executioner's Blade." Haku stared, "I can't believe it, one of the legendary seven swords is mine?"

Hattori nodded, "As is a considerable estate in the Land of Water that has been left unattended since the unfortunate demise of your clan. Well, except for the squatters. Your face says Zabuza never told you about any of this." Haku shook her head slightly, "No, he never said a word." Hattori nodded, "He was probably afraid you'd leave if you knew you were actually a noble. Then again he might have been concerned about your safety. Hidden Mist isn't known for its stability, and the nobility often catch the brunt of revolutions. Most Hidden Villages are only on their third or fourth Kage, my father is the twenty sixth Mizukage. Either way, now you know."

Haku nodded slightly, "Yes. I take it my orders upon my return are to join you as one of the Seven Swordsmen?" Hattori nodded, "That's right. We'll be tracking down the rest of the seven. There are six swords which can only be used to their full potential by members of certain clans. The Executioner's Blade is one of them." Haku's eyes widened, "What?" Hattori nodded and drew the blade from the seal he had stored it in.

"This is the blade of the Koumouri Clan. Stronger relatives of the Hidden Leaf's Fukusei Clan. You are no doubt aware that this blade can repair itself by drinking the blood of those it cuts. However when used by a member of the Koumori Clan, the blade can drain a person dry in seconds and feed their blood back to its user, replenishing the user's strength and healing them at an accelerated rate. As far as we can tell the only remaining member of Koumori clan, one Lord Alucard, reportedly left for the Land of Wrath when the slaughter of the nobles that claimed your family went down after he personally slaughtered hundreds of rebels, and he hasn't been back in the intervening fifty years. We're going to be going to see if we

can get him to come out of retirement."

"The second and third members will hopefully be easier to find. One is Suigetsu Hozuki, he only very recently went missing chasing down a lead on rogue swordsman Kisame Hoshigaki, the man who made off with the other five swords. The third is Mei Terumi, an extremely powerful kunoichi who uses Boil and Lava Release among others. She was actually on the short list to be Mizukage when my father took over."

There was a sudden knock at the door, Hattori turned, "That was a little too fast." He shouldered the Executioner's Blade and moved to the door, opening it partially and then springing back as a lightning clad fist blasted through it. Hattori effortlessly caught the fist and snuffed out the lightning, "YOOOOORIIIIII!" He started crushing the fist in his hand and shouts and protests and pleading issued quickly from the other side of the door. Hattori shoved the hand back through the door, yanked it open, jerked the man on the other side through and shoulder flipped him before slamming the massive Executioner's Blade into the floor next to his head.

The man he had yanked through the door had eyes the size of saucers, "Sorryâ€¦" he said in a very small voice. "What have I told you about breaking other peoples' doors Yori?" Hattori asked irritably. "Sorryyy!" Yori whined. "Hattori seven hundred and fifty two, Yori nine," declared a young woman in purple as she materialized in the room's only chair with a cup of tea. She nodded to Haku, "You must be Haku. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Bofu of the storm."

"And the kids are here too," Hattori declared irritably. Bofu waved her teacup gently in a noncommittal gesture, "You told us to watch them and make sure they didn't slack off. You didn't say we should stop them from following you." Hattori sighed, "And if they don't all get in here in thirty seconds we're gonna play catch and smash until I get tired of kicking them around the port!" Half a dozen bursts of smoke heralded the arrival of Hattori and Yori's students.

"You told us to practice, you didn't say what," declared a girl with short dark hair, "So we decided to practice our stealth tracking. If we can tail you without being spotted we can tail anybody!" Hattori's eye twitched, "And did you notice that my water clone sent you all haring off in exactly the wrong direction? You think I wasn't watching you clowns the whole time?! I saw you the minute you left Rain, and I started deciding what your punishment for coming after me when I told you not to would be!" All six of them flinched.

The air around Hattori started to ripple as his chakra flared and then it started to get hotter. His eyes glowed as declared angrily, "I'm sending every one of you back the hard way!" His hands flashed through an activation sequence almost too fast to see, "SKY TRAIN!" A miniature cyclone suddenly erupted beneath their feet as a seal appeared over their heads. PWOOM! The six teenagers were blasted through the seal and into the sky above where a monstrosly powerful air current was waiting to hurl them all the way back to Hidden Rain at the speed of a storm gale.

Hattori turned back to Bofu and Yori, "When they get there, make sure they're alright, and then I want you Yori to race them around the village. If they can beat you they only have to do four more laps. When they can't tell em they've gotta do nine at top speed." Yori and

Bofu grinned wickedly, "Right!" They both disappeared in puffs of smoke and Hattori sighed as he looked at the hole in the door, "This is why I pay extra for hotel rooms. Someone always makes a mess."

He closed the door and sighed at the hole in it. He pulled out a piece of paper and stuck it over the hole before going to sit in the chair. He looked at the ceiling, "They're good kids, I just wish they'd listen when I tell them to stay put." There was another knock at the door and Hattori got up, "Maybe that's the food!" He opened the door and caught a pie in the face as Yori's second shadow clone disappeared laughing, "SCORE!" Hattori shook with rage for a moment and then bellowed so loud Haku was sure Yori must have heard him all the way in Hidden Rain, "YOOOOOOOOOORIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII! Oh look the food's here."

The innkeeper bowed repeatedly and quickly, "I am so sorry sir! He just came out of nowhere!" Hattori's tongue somehow extended long enough to lick his entire face clean before slithering back into his mouth, "Don't worry, it wasn't your fault. He's an idiot. The pie is delicious by the way." The innkeeper blinked in surprise and then bowed, "Thank you sir!" Hattori grinned as he rolled the laundry cart laden with food inside and quickly unloaded it onto the low table before rolling it back out, "Thank you, this all looks and smells delicious."

The innkeeper bowed, "Thank you sir! Have a pleasant evening!" Hattori smiled, "I think I will." Then he closed the door, turned and blinked in surprise as he saw Haku wolfing down the food so fast it was almost comical. She sat back for a moment to take a breather after finishing her third plate. Then she realized Hattori was staring and blushed, "I'm sorry, I was just very hungrAAAAY!" The belch erupted out without the slightest warning and Haku was utterly mortified as she clamped a hand over her mouth and a dumbfounded look settled on Hattori's face.

Hattori started laughing and Haku blushed absolutely crimson, utterly glowing with embarrassment. Then Hattori was suddenly right next to her kissing her on the cheek, "I actually think it's kinda cute when girls enjoy themselves so much."

"Besides," he added as he grabbed a plate for himself with a grin, "Of all the reasons I've ever heard for going rogue, the food has never been one of them. I know full well the crew you ran with was usually hard up for food, so eat your fill, because I certainly will." Haku's blush abated slightly and she looked away, "Um, actually I'm a boy." Hattori looked at her and raised an eyebrow, "Haku I can see through your clothes. You're a girl." Haku squeaked in embarrassment and covered herself, "That's not what Zabuza said!" "A beautiful young lone girl in the midst of a pack of rogue shinobi with no prospects, do you really think Zabuza would let anyone know that you were a girl?" Haku thought for a moment and then shook her head, "No, he'd hide it from everybody, even me."

She was quiet for a while, sedately eating at a much slower and calmer rate while Hattori continued to snarf down food like a starving animal. Then Haku said quietly, "So it's okay for me to be attracted to strong men?" Hattori nodded around a mouth full of food as he set his most recent bowl down, "Perfectly natural." He swallowed and reached for another bowl and then Haku said, "Strong men with blonde hair?" Hattori's head whipped around and Haku

suddenly kissed him. What little extra Hattori's hair could stand on end in surprise it did and then he smiled and kissed her back. She leaned back a little when they came up for air and looked away with a blush and a slight smile, "Sorry, Zabuza didn't want me showing any affection for anybody, said it made me less efficient. So I've mmm?!"

Hattori had set his bowl back down and planted a deep passionate kiss on her lips. "Three things," he declared when they came up for air, "Number one, yes you are a girl and you liking guys is perfectly natural. Number two, you are an extremely beautiful and talented girl, so it is perfectly natural for \_me\_ to like \_you\_. And number three," he grinned teasingly, "Are you gonna eat that?" Haku blinked and then turned red and started to get angry before Hattori cut off the angry outburst with another kiss, "I'm teasing you Haku," he told her quietly, "Just trying to make you laugh."

Haku suddenly looked behind him, "Your friend's back." Hattori spun to look at the window and upon finding it empty turned back to Haku, "No he's wait a minute!" Haku waggled her eyebrows at him as she slurped down the last noodle of ramen from the bowl he'd had his hand on. Hattori's face twitched and convulsed for almost a full minute and then Haku couldn't take it anymore and burst out laughing. Whatever irritation Hattori might have felt melted on the spot and he leaned in and kissed her again thinking, \_ Best. Mission.

\_\_\*\*Ever\*\*\_\_.\_

\_Now I'm sure somebody out there is thinking, "Wait, Haku's actually a girl and \_\_\*\*didn't know?\*\*\_\_ Wow Haku's kinda dumbâ€|" \_\_\*\*NO.\*\*\_\_ Haku is not dumb. She's been lied to her entire life and had a very watchful and terrifying guardian with a six-foot long butcher's knife and a nasty temper making sure absolutely nobody messed with her or told her that she was anything other than one of the guys and treated her as such. She was raised in the midst of a band of Missing-Nin with no prospects so it was imperative that the fact of her biological sex not be made a point of lest the renegades attempt to capitalize on it when Zabuza wasn't looking because that would've been traumatizing for Haku and probably torn their little band of rebels apart (assuming Zabuza didn't tear them apart for messing with his surrogate daughter/beloved-sidekick). As Hattori and Haku pointed out, Zabuza did everything in his power to keep anyone from hurting Haku. Spreading the lie that she was a boy and making it such an ingrained and reflexive defense mechanism to scare off anyone who thought her a girl that she had actually half started to almost believe it. Keep in mind, Haku looked up to and trusted Zabuza more than anybody in the world, hell he \_\_\*\*was\*\*\_\_ her world, so anything he said was for her the most unquestionable of truths. Considering that and the absolute terror everyone around her had of contradicting Zabuza, if he had told her she was a giant magical walrus trapped in human form with amnesia, she probably would've at least half believed it.\_

\_As for our characters from Hidden Rain, pay attention to them, they're going to be important later.\_

## 8. Chapter 7: A New Chapter Begins

\_In the month since the Land of Waves mission, Sakura has taken to wearing a dark red version of Guy and Lee's jumpsuit under her armor.

It has been a very productive month and Teams Kakashi, Kurenai and Asuma have all improved dramatically.\_

=Chapter 7-A New Chapter Begins=

==A Month Later==

"Why did you mention her forehead?!" Naruto shouted at Konohamaru as they ran from a livid Sakura who had unfortunately just gotten the last little bit of her strength back. Even with the fox's chakra increasing his speed, Konohamaru was still airborne next to him from where Sakura's boot had connected with his rear, and Naruto could tell she was about to \_BOOM!\_ Naruto's feet lifted off the ground as Sakura's foot connected with his rear, propelling him an additional twenty feet forward through the air at double time.

He hit the ground running and he and Konohamaru turned a corner, "GANGWAY!" "Okay Konohamaru! I got a new one for ya! Straight from my grandpa! Watch close and do exactly what I DO!" An arm suddenly clothes lined Naruto and pulled him into a one armed hug as a hand suddenly ground a knuckle into his head, "Hi Naruto! Did you miss us?" Konohamaru, his friends and Sakura all skidded to a halt, turning to see the beautiful young blonde woman clad in light armor the color of sand, cheerfully holding Naruto badly off balance in a stranglehold, and her friend in black with purple face paint grinning at the two of them with just a hint of nervousness.

"TEMARI?!" Naruto exclaimed, "What are you doing here?! I GIVE! I GIVE!" Temari promptly turned loose and set him up right with a grin, "You know you love it." Naruto rubbed his head, "Oww..." Temari kissed him on the cheek, "Good to see you again." Sakura's jaw dropped along with Konohamaru's, Moegi's and Udon's, as Naruto's eyes widened. He looked at Temari, "Erm, did you guys get my last letter?" Temari drew very close to him and laid her index finger on his chest, "You mean the one that said you had passed your graduation test to Genin, or the one before it that said you were seeing someone now? Yeah, we got it." She suddenly flicked the rest of her fingers and blasted Naruto through the nearest fence.

"I was a \_little\_ upset," Temari said with a cheerful smile as she held her thumb and forefinger about a centimeter apart. Kankuro scratched his head, "Little? I haven't seen a sandstorm like that since the last time you and Gaara got into it!" As Temari turned and smiled daggers at him, he took a step back, his eyes widening, raising his hands in a peaceful gesture, "You're right just a little. Blew right over. Didn't bother you hardly at all!" Temari smiled, reached down, grabbed Naruto's foot, lifted him off the ground upside down and held him there with one hand, "But don't worry Naruto, I'm completely over it." \_DROP\_

Even Sasuke, who had only just now dared to poke his head around the corner winced. Temari turned to Sakura, Konohamaru, Moegi, Udon and Sasuke, "Is this your team Naruto?" She extended a hand to Sakura, "I'm Temari from the Sand Village, and this is my brother Kankuro. We're old friends of Naruto's. You must be Hinata," She said as Sakura shook her hand. Sakura immediately gasped in pain as Temari's grip threatened to break every bone in her hand, "NO! I'M...SAKURA!"

Temari's grip immediately relaxed, "Oh sorry," she apologized with

that cheerful innocent smile, "My mistake. I was certain Hinata would be beautiful and probably on Naruto's team if Naruto had anything to say about it." Sakura massaged her throbbing hand, "Well, thank you. No, Hinata's actually on a different team, this is our third teammate, my boyfriend Sasuke." Sasuke waved, not quite daring to risk shaking Temari's hand, "Sasuke Uchiha, nice to meet you. So you guys are from the Sand Village? What are you doing in the Hidden Leaf?"

A red haired boy with a tremendous gourd on his back walked up quietly and helped Naruto up. Naruto whispered to him, "Gaara, did Temari have a crush on me?" "You're just now figuring that out?" Gaara asked dryly. Temari's expression warned everyone who could see it to back up. Unfortunately Naruto and Gaara couldn't see it until Temari rounded on them, her face beet red, "IT TOOK ME KNOCKING YOU THROUGH A FENCE BECAUSE YOU'RE SEEING SOMEONE ELSE TO FIGURE THAT OUT?! HOW DUMB ARE YOU NARUTO?! I THOUGHT YOU WERE SMART!"

Temari seemed twelve feet tall, Naruto felt about an inch high and even Gaara backed away from him, trying to get out of Temari's firing line as she seethed at Naruto. Naruto blinked and scratched his head, a puzzled look on his face, "Gee Temari, I never really thought about it. I heard you liked tall guys with dark hair, and that you were seeing somebody else already." Temari's expression was surprised, then puzzled, then annoyed, then she rounded on Kankuro, "\_KANKUROOO!\_" Kankuro was already over a fence and gone.

Temari was so mad her chakra was almost visibly combusting as the wind whipped in furious little eddies around her, "When I get my hands on him..." Naruto looked at Gaara while Temari picked out in her head the exact horrid things she was going to do to Kankuro for telling Naruto that she wasn't interested, something only he would've dared to do, "It's great to see you all, but why are you here? Did something happen in Sand?"

Gaara shook his head, "No, but something's about to happen in Leaf. The Chunin Exams are being held here in a week." Naruto stared, "They are? I just got back from a mission, I've been a little out of the loop. Who all's attending?" Gaara ticked off the names on his fingers, "Sand, Grass, Rain, Waterfall, and a new village called Sound from the Land of Rice Paddies sent a squad as well. Are you up for promotion?" Naruto scratched his head, "I dunno, like I said, we just got back from a mission and haven't heard anything about it."

Gaara \_hmm\_-ed, "Well surely you will be up for advancement. In the mean time, it's been what, six months since we heard from you?" "Eight," Temari growled, still glaring at the spot where Kankuro had been. Naruto cringed, "Sorry guys, I've been really busy. I meant to write, I just kept getting distracted." "Either way," Gaara said peaceably before Temari could fire up again, "We should catch up. Sasori-sensei has given us the day off. You can introduce us to your team and tell us what you've been up to. Oh, before I forget," He turned to Sakura and Sasuke, "Hello, I am Gaara of the desert."

Sakura bowed slightly, "It's nice to meet you Gaara." Sasuke waved, "Hi. Sasuke Uchiha and my girlfriend Sakura Haruno. You apparently know Naruto already." Gaara nodded, "Yes, we have been friends for six years." "Seven last Tuesday," Temari corrected. Gaara blinked and

thought for a moment, "Yes, that's right." Sakura blinked, "You all remember the day you met?" Gaara nodded, "Yes, Naruto was the first friend I ever had outside my family."

All present who didn't know the story blinked, "Really? Why?" Gaara shrugged, "I'm a Jinchuriki. There's a Tailed Beast in my head. People were scared. Naruto was the first Jinchuriki I had ever met, and the first person to sympathize. When the other kids saw that he wasn't afraid of me, they got braver too. Now I'm a fun happy person." It wasn't what Gaara was saying that set them off, it was the utterly deadpan delivery. Gaara smiled slightly as Sasuke, Sakura, Konohamaru, Udon, and Moegi all doubled up laughing, "See? I'm loads of fun."

==A Little While Later==

Team Kurenai walked into the restaurant where Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke, Gaara and Temari were eating and talking. Konohamaru and company had gone off to practice the Transparent Escape Technique Naruto had taught them. Naruto gulped as he wondered what Temari was going to do, but he waved them over anyway and everyone scooted further into the booth, subtly making sure to get as many people between Hinata and Temari as possible.

Kiba looked at Gaara and Temari, "So who are these guys?" Naruto smiled as Hinata kissed him on the cheek, "Hinata, Kiba, Shino, these are Gaara and Temari. They're old friends of mine from the Village Hidden in the Sand." Temari leaned forward smiling pleasantly, "So you're Hinata. Naruto sent us a letter that said you two were together. I must confess, I'm a little jealous." Kiba and Shino looked at her like she was out of her mind as Hinata blushed crimson in shock.

Then Hinata wrapped her arms around Naruto and said bluntly, "MINE!" Her expression was so fiercely determined that Temari actually recoiled a little with a blink. To Gaara, Sakura and Sasuke, it looked like a mouse telling a lioness to back off. It took about ten seconds for it to sink in. Temari's mouth twitched, and then she and everyone else burst out laughing. Except Naruto, who just smiled as his tail coiled around Hinata protectively.

Temari finally managed to stop laughing after a few moments. She wiped a tear from her eye, "It's alright Hinata. I don't blame you. It's totally Kankuro's fault and he's going to pay for it when I catch him, but I don't blame you. Who wouldn't want Naruto?"

Kiba, Shino, Sakura and Sasuke had only just managed to stop laughing when she said it. Kiba nearly fell out of the booth he was laughing so hard, even Akamaru was wagging his tail and smiling as though it were the funniest thing he had ever heard. Hinata, Temari and Gaara all frowned, Hinata in annoyance and Gaara and Temari in confusion.

"What's so funny?" Temari asked. "Who, who wouldn't want..." Sasuke was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe and couldn't finish. Temari looked at him, "What?" Naruto sighed, "I wasn't exactly Mr. Popular at the Academy. That was Sasuke. I had some problems being a Jinchuriki too. A lot of our generation never knew about it, and didn't until I told them, but their parents knew. They didn't know why their parents didn't like me, but they could tell they didn't and

they didn't know anything about me to help them get past that, so they weren't my biggest fans either. I did make some friends though, and Hinata was the very first."

"Oh," Temari said, "Well that explains why you picked her over me." She poked Sasuke, who was still laughing, "And for the record, Naruto is tremendously popular in Sand. He'd have mobs of girls after him if I wasn't." All eyes except Gaara's widened in shock, "HE WOULD?" "He would?" Hinata asked in surprise, her voice sounding very small. "I would?" Naruto asked in surprise. "You would," Gaara replied, "Being the Kazekage's daughter gives Temari a bit of precedence and authority to throw around, so everyone very wisely backed off once word got around that she wanted you. Really, we're very surprised it's not the same here."

Naruto smiled, "Well, most people don't know who my dad was, and there's the Jinchuriki thing, so a lot of people don't see me the way you guys do." Shino looked across the table at Naruto, "Is your father someone we would know?" "Naruto's dad was the Fourth Hokage," Hinata told him. Kiba and Shino stared, both looking as though they had just been told Akamaru was actually a dragon.

==The Next Day==

Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke waited on the bridge where they always met with Kakashi. Sakura groaned, "Why does he always set the time so early when he knows he's going to be late?" Naruto shrugged, "Training for dealing with future unpleasant clients?" Sakura paused mid fume and looked at him, "Really?" Naruto shrugged, "Dunno but it's the excuse I'd use." Sakura cast him a mild glare.

Kakashi suddenly appeared on top of one of the arches over the bridge, "Hello everybody. Sorry I'm late, I got lost on the path of life." He leapt down, "I know it's rather sudden, but I've nominated you for the Chunin Exams." He held out three sheets of paper, "These are the application forms." "Application forms?" Sakura asked. "You're repeating me Sakura," Kakashi said, "This is all completely voluntary. If you don't feel ready for it yet, you can wait until next year. If you do want to participate, sign these application forms and come to room 301 at the Academy. It's at three PM, five days from now. That's it."

"Awesome!" Naruto declared. He looked at Sasuke and Sakura, "I think we're all in. You?" They nodded with a smile, and Kakashi smiled behind his mask, "Alright then. See you there." He promptly disappeared.

==That Evening at Sundown==

Naruto perched on a rooftop with Sasuke, Sakura, and Teams Kurenai and Asuma, "Here they come," he said as a small flood of ninja advanced through the village gates in clumps of three in the fading light. Hinata gasped suddenly and pointed, "Look!" They all looked and Teams Kakashi and Kurenai caught their breath as they recognized the masked figure advancing through the gates with over a dozen shinobi behind him, "It's that guy from the bridge," Naruto said, "Is he a genin?!"

Sakura shook her head, "No way! He's got to be one of the Jonin instructors!" There was a sound like water flowing behind them,

"Wrong on both counts." They turned and saw a young man with white hair materialize next to them out of a puddle of water, "That's Hattori Hanzo, the head of the Rain Village." He stood, "So you're the Leaf Village's candidates huh? You won't stand a chance against our squads." "We'll see about that!" Kiba barked.

Sakura gave the water ninja a piercing glare, "Why would the head of a hidden village run around at the order of another village head?" He grinned and flipped something massive up out of the puddle he had been standing in. It glinted in the fading light, "Might've had something to do with this." He planted the blade of Zabuza's sword on the rooftop, pulled a bottle from his side and drank deeply as Teams Kakashi and Kurenai stared at the weapon and how easily the foreigner handled it. He leaned on the sword and continued, "The Mizukage and Lord Hattori go way back, so Lord Hattori's helping him get settled in as the new boss, but he's still the Master of Hidden Rain, and his former teammates are two of the Jonin instructors for the Hidden Rain's teams. He wouldn't have missed this for the world."

He took another drink, "Name's Suigetsu. Hattori told me I should come have a look at you since you were the team that took down Zabuza's squad." He sheathed his sword on his back, "Zabuza must've had some real losers working for him if you guys beat them." Before anyone could reply he leapt down to the street laughing, liquefying momentarily before rematerializing and walking over to the man he had declared the head of the Hidden Rain Village talking nonstop.

Sakura, Sasuke and Kiba were all varying degrees of livid. Naruto allowed a spark of irritated electricity to play around his fingers, "I wonder if he's taking the exam? I'd love to see what electricity does to that water body of his." "Agreed," Sakura and Sasuke growled in unison.

==Five Days Later==

Squad 7 met up outside the Academy and headed in, Sasuke leading the way as Sakura and Naruto's eyes flickered about, taking in and analyzing everything. As they walked along the second floor, they saw Lee get punched back into a crowd of spectators. Naruto raised an eyebrow, "'that was way too slow to have even come close to Lee,'" he thought. Then he heard Tenten begging to be let through and then get punched as well, and he realized what was up as one of the two thugs blocking the door laughed about how they were nice by comparison. He sighed, "Sasuke, Sakura, would one of you like to tell them or should I?"

The small group of spectators being blocked turned around to look at him; he hadn't said it quietly. "I think I'll let Sakura explain," Sasuke said with a smug smile. Sakura grinned, "We're on the \_second\_ floor people, those two put up a genjutsu to mess with you." One of the thugs grinned as the air rippled slightly around the sign that said 301, revealing it to actually say 201, "So you saw through the genjutsu huh? Well, aren't we the smart ones? Well let's see you deal with \_this!\_" He promptly leapt forward and his leg came up for a kick.

Lee moved with his usual speed and caught his leg with one hand before any of Squad 7 even had to move, "I think that is quite enough." The bully lost his balance and fell, gasping in pain even

after Lee released his grip. Neji and Tenten walked over as the bully and his friend made tracks while the rest of the competitors headed for the next floor, "What happened to the plan Lee? You were the one who said to keep a low profile and not let anyone see our skill level." Lee sighed, "I know, but..." "Never mind," Tenten said, "It's over, forget it." Lee sighed, "Hello Sakura, Sasuke and Naruto, it is good to see you again. I had heard you were all taking the exams too. I know you shall be ferocious competitors!"

Squad 7 smiled, "You guys too," Naruto replied, "This year's finals are gonna be one heck of a show! My friends from Sand are here too. I can't believe they're still genin, but I have a feeling they won't be for long." Tenten smiled, "you'll have to introduce us."

Kakashi and Guy met them upstairs and after a quick pep talk from their mentors, the two teams went into the room. They found every eye in the room turning to look at them as they stepped into the crowded room. Naruto stumbled slightly as Hinata pounced him, "Naruto!" She gave him a quick kiss and hugged him as Shino, Kiba, Shikamaru, Ino and Choji walked up. "Well, looks like the gang's all here!" Kiba said with a grin.

Suddenly a voice interrupted the cheerful greetings, "Hey guys, you might want to keep it down," A young man with white hair and glasses walked up, "You guys are the nine rookies right? Fresh out of the Academy? I wouldn't go making a spectacle of yourselves. Just cool it, this isn't a class field trip." "Well who asked you?" Ino barked, "Who are you?" "I am Kabuto Yakushi, but really. Look around you. You've made quite an impression." They all looked around and saw several dozen sets of eyes pointed in their direction.

Kabuto indicated one particularly nasty looking group, "See those guys? They're from the Rain Village, very touchy." He indicated the rest of the crowd with a tilt of his head, "They all are, this exam makes everyone tense, and you don't want to rub them the wrong way right now. How could you not though? Nobody could expect you to know how things work here, you're just rookies. You remind me of myself awhile back." Neji and Tenten were on the verge of spontaneous combustion at being called rookies.

"Kabuto right?" Sakura asked, "This isn't your first time taking the exam?" Kabuto smiled, "No, actually it's my seventh." Everyone raised an eyebrow as he continued, "Well they're held twice a year, so this is my fourth year." "So you're a veteran," Sakura said, "You must be an expert by now." "Yeah, sort of," Kabuto replied. "So you can give us all the tips eh?" Naruto asked with a grin. "Some expert," Shikamaru grumbled, "He's never passed!" Kabuto scratched his head embarrassed, "Well you know what they say, seventh time's the charm!"

Shikamaru sighed, "Guess that means all those rumors about the exam being tough are true then huh? What a drag." "Well don't give up hope yet," Kabuto said with a grin, "Maybe I could help you kids out a little." He fished a thick stack of cards from his pocket, "With my ninja info cards." Sakura raised an eyebrow, "What are those?" Kabuto spread them out, "Well it's hard to explain. These are chakra coded with everything I've learned over the past four years. I've got more than two hundred of them," he said as he knelt down and laid the large stack on the ground, "So you see, I haven't been completely wasting my time."

"They may not look like much to the naked eye," he continued as he turned one over, revealing it to be blank, "In fact they appear blank. Don't want just anyone knowing what's on them." He spun the card with his finger, "Like this." When he finished spinning it, they saw it had a map on it. "Cool," Naruto said, "What is it?" "The geographical distributions of all the ninjas taking the exams. The regions they come from and how many from each village."

He looked up at them, "Why do you think they all come here to take the exam together at the same time?" Nobody answered so Kabuto answered his own question, "It's to foster friendship between nations, international brotherhood and all that, and it's true enough as far as it goes." "But there's another reason," Sasuke said. "Yep," Kabuto said, "This way they can carefully regulate the number of shinobi that end up being in each village, thereby maintaining the balance of power." They all nodded, and Shikamaru declared it to all be a drag.

Kabuto promptly wiped the card and Sasuke asked, "Do those cards of yours have any information on the other candidates? Individually?" "They might," Kabuto replied with a grin, "You have someone special in mind?" "I might," Sasuke replied. "Well I can't promise my information is complete or perfect, but I've got something on just about everyone," Kabuto said as he lined his cards back up.

He lifted one off the top, "So tell me anything about them you know, name, where they're from, anything." "Suigetsu from the Hidden Rain," Sasuke told him. Kabuto frowned, "You mean the Rain Village Head's bodyguard? He's not taking the exam." Naruto sighed, "Guess I won't get to find out what zapping him does after all. How about the Hidden Sound guys? I had never heard of their village before a week ago." "They're small," Kabuto said, "They sprang up recently. Nobody knows anything about them. Those guys are a complete mystery. But I can tell you that if they're anything like all the other villages, they sent extremely skilled candidates. But you get the point, the competition's going to be fierce this year."

"So it would seem," Hinata said. "Do you really think it's going to be tougher this time?" Sakura asked. "Oh yeah," Kabuto said, casting a glance at the crowd, "I've never seen a crop of candidates with as much potential as this bunch. We've got our work cut out for us." As Kabuto stood up, there was a sudden blur through the crowd and a shinobi with spiky hair jumped over everyone's heads, two kunai appearing in his hand. He threw them and Kabuto leapt back out of the way. Then a man in purple with a face covered in bandages materialized in front of them, pulling up his sleeve and swiping at Kabuto. He didn't hit Kabuto, but Kabuto's glasses shattered an instant later anyway.

Kabuto took off his glasses, "I see, it was that kind of attack." Then he suddenly gasped and collapsed to his knees coughing. As Sakura and Naruto rushed to check on him, the third of the Sound genin appeared, a girl with long black hair and the three smiled smugly at Kabuto. "Not such a tough guy after all I guess," the one with bandages said, "Maybe that's why he's on his seventh try." "Write this on your little card punk," the one with spiky hair said, "the genin from the Sound Village will be chunin when this is over! Guaranteed."

Before anyone could say or do anything, a voice yelled from a cloud of smoke that appeared at the other end of the room, "ALRIGHT! Listen up you baby faced degenerates!" The smoke cleared away revealing a man in a headband and black trench coat along with a platoon of proctors, "It's time to begin. I am Ibiki Morino, your proctor, and from this moment on, your worst enemy."

\_I know what you're thinking, \_\_\*\*"WHAT?! TEMARI AND NARUTO?!"\*\*\_\_  
Yes. Temari and Naruto. Naruto was one of the first friends Gaara ever made since after worming the information about the Tailed Beasts and Jinchuriki out of the Third Hokage he went to Sand with Jiraiya to meet Gaara. Once there he helped Gaara make friends, essentially giving Temari and Kankuro their baby brother back. He has since visited Sand many times, and has become very good friends with the Sand Siblings. His pranks and his friendship with the Sand Siblings who were no longer estranged by their peers and instead quite popular due to Gaara no longer being a psycho, led to Naruto sharing in their popularity and having as many girls chasing after him in Sand as Gaara and Kankuro until Temari admitted to her crush on him and all the other girls in Sand immediately decided their health dictated they back off. \_

\_Yes, Kankuro was the one who told Naruto Temari was seeing somebody, partially to be an overprotective big brother, and partially to be a teasing big brother. He hadn't intended for Naruto to wind up with Hinata instead of Temari, it had mostly just been a joke for him until that letter came in and Temari was so upset that they needed a new roof after she finally calmed down. Would Naruto have gone out with Temari if Kankuro hadn't told him she wasn't interested? Probably. Would he give up Hinata for Temari? Not a chance.\_

\_Yes Temari is very strong. She is as strong or stronger than Sakura. There is a reason for this, you will just have to wait for me to explain it though, and trust me, the explanation is well worth the wait.\_

\_Yes, Suigetsu has been freed from the Hidden Sound and is now working for Hattori.\_

## 9. Chapter 8: The Exams Begin

=Chapter 8-The Exams Begin=

"First," Ibiki Morino pointed his finger at the Sound nin, "You candidates from the Village Hidden in the Sound! Knock it off! Who told you you could fight?! You want to be failed before we've even begun?!" The one wrapped in bandages turned to him, "Sorry," he said unapologetically, "It's our first time. Guess we're a little jumpy, \_sir\_." Morino grinned, "I'll say this once, so listen up. There will be no combat between candidates. No attacking each other without the permission of your proctor, and even then, the use of fatal force is strictly prohibited! Anyone who even thinks of messing with me will be disqualified immediately. Got it?"

His voice carried such menacing authority that every candidate in the room was silent, taking care to not even \_breathe\_ wrong. One of the Sound nin smirked, "No fatal force? That's no fun!"

"Now, if we're ready," Morino continued, "we'll proceed to the first

stage of the Chunin exam. Hand over your paperwork, in return you'll each be given a number." He held up a stack of paper squares with numbers on them, "This number determines where you will sit. We'll start the written test once you're all seated." Even though Naruto had known about it already, he still got a sinking feeling in his gut at the words "written test"\_\_.

==A Few Minutes Later==

Naruto slid into his seat and smiled as Hinata sat down, "Hiya beautiful." Hinata blushed and smiled, "Hi Naruto." Suddenly Morino tapped a piece of chalk on the chalk board at the front of the room, "Everyone eyes front. There are a few rules you need to be aware of, and I won't answer any questions, so ya better pay attention the first time around!" He turned and started writing on the board, "Alright, rule number one is this. The written part of the exam is conducted on a point reduction system. Contrary to what some of you may be used to, you all begin with a perfect score of ten points. One point will be deducted for each answer you get wrong. So if you miss three, your final score will be seven."

"Rule number two," he continued, "Teams will pass or fail based on the total scores of all three members." There were several expressions of shock and horror around the room. "SILENCE," Morino boomed, "I have my reasons, so shut up and listen. Rule number three, the sentinels positioned around the room are there to watch you carefully for any signs of cheating, and for every incident they catch you cheating, they will subtract two points from the culprits score. Be warned, their eyes are extremely sharp, and if they catch you five times you'll be dismissed before the tests are even scored. Anyone fool enough to be caught cheating by the sentinels doesn't deserve to be here!"

One of the sentinels grinned, "I've got my eye on you guys," and earned the unease of an entire section of applicants. "If you want to be considered shinobi," Morino continued, "then show us, what exceptional shinobi you can be." Just as some applicants were crossing their fingers banking on their own scores to pull their teams through, Morino continued, "If any candidate should get a zero and fail the test, \_then the entire team fails\_."

Several applicants cringed and glanced around at their teammates as Morino continued, "The final question won't be given out until fifteen minutes before the end of the testing period. You'll have one hour total. BEGIN!" The applicants immediately picked up their pencils and started examining the questions, quickly realizing that even the simplest was difficult, and the others were worse. Naruto grinned and closed his eyes, now it was just a matter of time and trust.

==The Night Before==

Naruto grinned as Team Guy arrived, "Good we're all here." "What's this about Naruto?" Neji asked as he came in. Naruto looked around making sure he had everyone's attention, "The first part of the Chunin Exams is a written test of mind numbing difficulty, administered by Ibiki Morino, the head of ANBU's interrogations and torture unit." There were some flinches and the odd gasp of fear as that sank in.

Naruto grinned, "The aim of the first part of the test is to get us to cheat, and if we're going to pass, then we're gonna have to." Sakura sat bolt upright, "WHAT?!" Naruto looked at her, "The point is to test our reconnaissance and information gathering abilities. We're ninja, we need to be able to discreetly gather and relay information, and they're going to test us to make sure we can do that. If any of us fail with zero of the ten questions correct, our whole team is disqualified."

There were several sharp intakes of breath as he continued, "And since we can't switch up our squads to optimize our reconnaissance potential, we're going to need to work as a team. We've got three dojutsu, three braniacs, a Shino, and an Ino. That leaves me Kiba Choji and Lee to find alternative routes of cheating. None of us can afford to lose a member of our team, so we need to figure out how to pick up our weakest links." He looked at Kiba Choji and Lee, "No offense fellas, I'm on that list too."

Neji nodded, "I understand your point, but why should we help you? You will be our competitors." Naruto gave him a hard look, "You leave the competition to me." Something suddenly tapped Neji from behind, "AH!" Neji jumped, "Byakugan!" His eyes widened, "How?!" He deactivated his Byakugan and saw that where a glowing Naruto chakra signature had been an instant before there was nothing.

Naruto smiled coldly, "My transparent escape jutsu allows me to bring all the shadow clones I want to the party, and combined with my transformations for mobility, I've got a thousand ways to distract and sabotage people up my sleeves. As you can see, only someone with the Byakugan can see through my jutsu, and even with it, you can't see the other three clones scattered around the room." Neji immediately reactivated his Byakugan and searched the room, "What?! Impossible!" Naruto grinned as his shadow clones picked up small things and tossed them at Neji, "I've actually been working on this with Hinata and my grandfather for quite some time. When I go invisible, nobody sees me, and I don't leave a trace behind me."

"So," he continued, "are we going to help each other out or not?"

==Now==

Fifteen minutes into the exam, Naruto's invisible clones began their mischief. He hadn't been lying the night before, even with a Byakugan, his clones were virtually impossible to spot. There was a very simple reason for that, they were very small and only just barely there to begin with. They had one or two small jutsu's in them and that was it. But since they were made of such little chakra, they didn't make the usual puff of smoke that normal shadow clones did when they broke, they just winked out of existence.

All around the room people started scratching, looking around as though there were flies buzzing around their heads, flinching as tiny little fingers pinched and teeny Naruto bugs bit them. Some looked down as they felt something brush against their leg and looked back at their paper only to jump half from their skin as they saw that their answers had all disappeared from their papers. Others found their tests turning into images of gorgeous young women clothed in nothing but clouds for just a moment or two before changing back,

leaving them rubbing their eyes and wondering if they were seeing things.

A moment later the sentinels began throwing people out, many of whom were the ones Naruto's clones had chosen to mess with. Naruto's clones faded away, their work done. Everyone whose concentration could be thrown off had been thrown off. Naruto grinned as his pencil casually scritch-scratched across his page, casually tracing the answers Shikamaru's shadows provided. Naruto grinned as he saw Hinata chugging through the test as well, things were going very well. Sakura, Shikamaru and Tenten were putting their heads together with Sasuke, Neji and Hinata checking their answers against the other people in the room who appeared to know what they were doing.

Shikamaru was also doubling as a relay for the answers along with Ino and Shino. Shino was relaying things from Sasuke and Neji back to Sakura, Shikamaru and Tenten using his bugs, and Ino was jumping between bodies every few minutes relaying answers from Sakura to Choji and Lee. Shikamaru was running answers to Kiba and Naruto, and Sasuke Neji and Hinata were able to copy what they saw easily.

By the time it was time for Morino to announce the final question, over a third of the room had been kicked out for getting caught cheating. Every member of the team Naruto had assembled was still there though, as were the Sand Siblings, the three sound nin, and several Leaf and Rain genin along with a handful from other villages.

"Alright," Morino announced, "Listen up. Here's the tenth and final question." Grips tightened on pencils all over the room as he continued, "But, before I give you the question, there are some rules you need to be aware of. These rules are unique to question ten. Listen carefully, and try not to let them frighten you." Of course, the tension levels in the room skyrocketed automatically.

"Rule number one, each of you is completely free to choose not to be given the final question. It's your decision." "Whooooa," Temari exclaimed, "So what's the catch? What happens if we don't want to do it?" "If you choose not to take the tenth question," Morino replied, "Regardless of your answers to the other nine, you'll get a zero. In other words you fail, and of course that means both your teammates fail as well."

As a wave of muttering rippled through the remaining applicants, Morino cut them off quietly, "Not so fast," there was instant silence as they all sensed something bad coming, "You didn't let me finish. If you do accept the question, and you answer it incorrectly, you will not only fail, YOU WILL BE BARRED FROM TAKING THE CHUNIN EXAM EVER AGAIN."

Kiba leapt up, "Hey that's bull man! What kinda crazy rule is that? There are loads of people here who have taken the test before!" Naruto had a terrible time resisting the urge to leap up and deck him as Morino started to laugh darkly, "I guess you're just unlucky, I wasn't making the rules before, but I am now. Of course, if you don't want to take it, you don't have to. If you're not feeling confident then by all means skip it. You can come back and try again next year." Kiba sat down utterly cowed.

"Now then," Morino declared, "The tenth and final question! Those of you who don't want to take it raise your hand. Your number will be recorded and you're free to go." Less than a minute later, hands started going up and applicants started leaving. Half the remaining applicants were gone in a matter of minutes. A few moments later, the only ones left were sitting rock solid and determined, willing to gamble everything on this final question.

Morino looked around, "Well, I admire your determination if nothing else. For those of you remaining, there's only one thing left for you to do." The tension in the room cranked up what little there was left to crank. "And that," Morino continued, "Is for me to tell you... that you've all passed the first exam."

There were stunned looks and then Temari stood half up, "Wait, what just happened? Where's the tenth question?" Morino's face suddenly split in a huge grin, "There never was one! At least not a written one. Your decision to stay was the answer to the tenth question!" "So the other nine questions were just a waste of time?!" Temari exclaimed. "Oh no," Morino laughed, "The first nine questions had a very important purpose! They were to test your ability to surreptitiously gather information under the most adverse of circumstances." Temari blinked and sat back, "Oh...well that clears up everything."

"Let me explain," Morino continued, "My objective was to test you not only as individuals but as a team, and to see how well you function as a part of that team, that's why the test was scored on a team basis. It was so that you knew that everything you did or failed to do affected your teammates. I wanted to see how you handled the pressure."

"The first nine questions were difficult," Morino continued, "As you may have figured out, too difficult for any genin to be expected to solve. I imagine most of you came to that conclusion rather quickly, that you'd have to cheat to have any chance of passing. The fact is that this test was designed to encourage cheating, it almost demanded it! Of course it would have done you little good if you had nobody to cheat off of, so I disguised two chunin who already knew the answers and had them sit in with you."

"Those who were caught failed," Morino continued as he began untying the bandana covering his head, "Better not to cheat than to cheat clumsily." He pulled off his bandana and as those present stared at the horrible mangled visage of the scars, puncture wounds and burn marks on his scalp, he went on, "Information, it can be the most valuable weapon in battle. How well you gather information can determine whether or not a mission's a failure, or success. There will be times you have to risk your life to get it."

Morino tied his bandana back on, "Of course, you must always consider the source of your information, intelligence gathered from an enemy is not necessarily accurate. Always bear this in mind: disinformation can be worse than no information at all. It can lead to the deaths of comrades, or the loss of a village! That's why I put you in a position where you had to gather accurate intelligence, 'cheat' in order to survive, and that's why those who weren't good enough at it were weeded out. Leaving the rest of you."

"Okay," one applicant said, "But I'm still not getting what the tenth

question is about." "You're not?" Morino asked, "The tenth question was the point of the whole exam! Surely you see that! We were testing you as part of a squad! The tenth question presented two choices, both difficult. You could play it safe and your whole team failed, or you could risk it, and risk never becoming chunin. It was a no win situation. The sort Chunin have to face almost every day."

"For example, let me give you a hypothetical mission, to steal a document from an enemy stronghold. You have no idea how many combatants await you, or how well armed they are. Furthermore, you have reason to suspect that the enemy is expecting you, that you might very well be walking blindly into a trap."

"Now do you have the option of taking a pass on this insane mission? Of saying my comrades and I would rather live to fight another day?! Can you choose to avoid danger? **\*\*NO.\*\*** There will be many missions that will seem almost suicidal if you think about them, but you do not think about it. You focus on the goal and achieving it through courage and discipline. These are the qualities required of a chunin squad leader."

"Those whose determination falters in the face of adversity, those who would put their comrades' lives in jeopardy by worrying about their own, will never be allowed to call themselves chunin, at least as long as I'm here. As for the rest of you, you have successfully answered the ten questions I put to you. You have earned the right to continue on to the next step. You have passed through the first gate. I hereby declare the first section of the Chunin Selection Exam completed. There's nothing left but to wish you all good luck."

Just as the first ripples of excitement started through the crowd, a shape exploded through the window, quickly unfurling into a pretty kunoichi in a long brown coat standing in front of a large banner, "HEADS UP BOYS AND GIRLS! This is no time to be celebrating! I'll be your next proctor, Anko Mitarashi! Ready for the second test?" She didn't wait for an answer before thrusting her fist into the air, "GOOD! FOLLOW ME!"

Morino poked his head around the banner as the applicants stared, "You're early. Again." Anko looked embarrassed for a moment then she looked at the crowd, "How many are there?" She looked at Morino, "Ibiki, you let all these guys pass? Your test was too easy. You must be getting soft." "Or it could be," Morino replied, "a stronger crop of candidates this year."

Anko turned to the crowd, "Hmm, they sure don't look it. Trust me, by the time I'm done, more than half will be eliminated." As a few exclamations of shock escaped the candidates, Anko grinned, "Mmm...this is gonna be fun. Alright, you maggots have had it easy so far. But things are gonna be different starting first thing in the morning! I'll let your squad leaders know where you're to meet me. Dismissed."

==The Next Morning==

The candidates stood outside an immense fenced in area full of enormous trees. Anko announced, "This is the location of the second exam, the Forty Fourth Battle Training Ground, but we call it the Forest of Death."

## 10. Chapter 9: The Forest of Death

### =Chapter 9: The Chunin Exams Part 2-The Forest of Death=

The Forest of Death was really only one section of the massive swamp that surrounded the Village Hidden in the Leaves, but Naruto knew from his transformed shadow clones' exploration the night before, that it was as nasty and vile a piece of swamp as had ever besmirched the face of earth. There was a reason nobody strayed from the road on their way into the village, and little green patches of hell like this one were it.

"Now before we begin this test, I have something to hand out to you all," Anko announced as she pulled a stack of papers from an inside pocket of her coat, "It's just a standard consent form." There were a number of questioning looks throughout the crowd as she continued, "Before the test, all of you are going to have to read over this form and then sign it." "What's it for?" one of the contestants asked. Anko grinned, "Well, some of you might not come back from this test, and I have to get your consent to that risk, otherwise it would be my responsibility," she laughed.

There was a wave of concerned muttering as Anko went on, "Now I'll announce what you'll be doing in this test." She handed the forms to Naruto who was near the front, "Here, pass these out." As the forms started going around she announced, "The first thing you need to know is that this test will tax every one of your survival skills." She unfurled a small map to show them, "First I'll give you a description of the terrain in the testing ground. The Forty Fourth Battle Training Ground has forty four locked entrance gates. There are rivers and a forest inside. In the center is a locked tower located ten kilometers from each gate. It's in this confined area that you'll undergo the survival test."

She tucked the map away into her coat, "The test consists of an anything goes battle, to get your hands on these scrolls." She held up two scrolls, one blue, one white, and Sasuke asked, "Both of them?" "Yes," Anko replied, "You will be fighting to obtain both a Heaven scroll and an Earth Scroll. All in all twenty six teams will be participating in this test, so half of those teams will be going after the Heaven scroll, and the other half will be going after the Earth Scroll. I'll hand over one kind of scroll to each team, and that's what you'll be vying for."

"Ok, so how do we pass the test?" Sasuke asked. "Your entire squad must bring both a Heaven and Earth scroll to the tower," Anko declared. "So at most only half the teams can pass," Sakura said. "No one ever said it would be easy," Anko replied, "Oh and one more thing, the test has a time limit. You must finish within five days."

"Five days out there?!" Ino exclaimed. "\_What are we supposed to do for food?!\_" Choji exclaimed. "Just look around," Anko replied, "The forest is full of things to eat! There's plenty to feed all of you." "Yeah," Kabuto smirked, "But that's not all the forest has plenty of, there are man-eating beasts and poisonous plants in there." "Aw man!" Choji exclaimed. "Quiet down," Ino scolded him, "This is why it's called \_survival\_ training you know."

"With those circumstances," Neji muttered to Lee and Tenten, "There's no way even half the teams will finish." "With the days getting longer and the nights getting shorter we'll have less time to recover," Lee agreed with a grin, "It is a challenge indeed!" "Surrounded by enemies, there won't be any time to rest. We'll have to keep a constant watch," Sasuke said to himself. "Right," Anko replied having somehow heard all three, "This test also measures endurance behind enemy lines. This is designed to be a grueling test, and I'm sure some of you won't be up to the challenge."

Shikamaru raised his hand, "So, um, let's say mid-exam. Can we quit?" "Of course not!" Anko replied, "In the middle of a battle you can't say 'sorry I quit!'" Then she smiled, "Well I guess you could, but it's probably gonna getcha killed!" "Oh just great," Shikamaru drawled, "This is gonna be a drag."

Anko turned back to the majority of the contestants, "There are also some ways you can get disqualified. The first is simple, if all three members of a team can't make it to the tower with both scrolls within five days. Number two, if a team loses a member or if a member becomes incapacitated and cannot continue. But most importantly, none of you, absolutely none of you may look at the contents of the scrolls until you reach the tower. There are times when a ninja will be asked to carry secret documents. The scroll rule is to test your integrity."

"Ok," she smiled, "We're done. Each team take your consent forms and exchange them over there for your scrolls." She pointed to a booth over by the gate, "After that, each team pick a gate and you'll be let inside." She sighed, "Oh and I have one more word of advice, 'just don't die!'"

The applicants split off into their teams and began discussing what they were going to do to get an edge. Squad 7 gathered by a nearby boulder, "Everything set?" Sasuke asked. Naruto grinned, "You know it. This is gonna be a cake walk." Sakura shook her head with a smile, "I still have a hard time wrapping my head around you being this good." Naruto grinned, "Well I do have big shoes to fill you know." Sakura snorted with laughter, "And there's the dad card." Naruto shrugged, "It's an important one."

"One question though," Sasuke asked, "Why is one of your shadow clones riding in Hinata's pocket disguised as a tiny fox?" Naruto raised an eyebrow, "Because I love her and want to be able to help her if she needs me to. You'd do the same for Sakura." Sasuke nodded, "Point." Sakura smiled and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Are we ready then?" Naruto asked.

Sasuke nodded, "I think so." Naruto pushed off from where he had been leaned against the rock, "Then let's go."

==Half an Hour Later==

The chunin manning the gate unlocked it and let them in. They hurried in and in a few minutes later paused. "Have you acquired a target yet?" Sasuke asked. Naruto grinned, "Yep. You remember that Kabuto guy?" "Should we really go after him?" Sakura asked, "He did at least try to help us." Naruto shrugged, "Normally I'd let him off for that, and if his team can fight off my shadow clones we'll go after somebody else, but I don't like him. This is his seventh time, and

his teams have made it to the finals every time. He always backs out before he can risk being promoted to Chunin. Something smells fishy about that to me." Sakura and Sasuke stared, "He backs out every time?"

Naruto nodded, "don't know why, don't much care. If he's just going to back out anyway, he can afford to donate his scroll to us." Sakura and Sasuke nodded. Naruto grinned, "And there's one of my clones back. Kabuto's team didn't stand a chance against the ambush. My clones are headed this way with the scroll now." Sasuke and Sakura blinked, they had known Naruto had sent clones after Kabuto's team, but they hadn't expected them to work that fast.

Naruto fished a scroll from inside his coat, "No reason we can't hurry them along though." He opened it and an instant later two Naruto clones popped out of it, both of them with two tails instead of the usual one. One handed over a blue scroll with a grin and then both dissipated in puffs of smoke as Naruto rolled the summoning scroll back up. "Just out of curiosity, how did you beat them?" Sasuke asked.

Naruto grinned as his tail waved behind him, "You know how powerful my Thunder Release is when I use my hands? I've been practicing, and if I use it with two tails instead of two hands it's fifty times as powerful. I had half a dozen shadow clones use my Twin Tail Thunder Wave on Kabuto and his team all at once. They probably won't be moving much for a couple of days." He straightened up, "I've got the other three clones I sent hauling them out. I'm not heartless, they won't get eaten." He handed the scroll to Sakura, "Would you hold onto this? You're the best of us in close. If anyone gets close enough to you to take a scroll off you you'll break them into pieces."

Sakura accepted the scroll with a smile, "Thanks." "Let's head for the tower," Naruto grinned.

==An Hour Later==

Squad 7 pushed through their designated door into the large empty room on the other side. Naruto looked around, "Huh. I didn't think we were that early." Sakura pointed, "No look! Those must be the instructions. 'If qualities of heaven are what you desire, acquire wisdom to take your mind higher. If earthly qualities are what you lack, train your body and prepare to attack. When Heaven and Earth are opened together the perilous path shall become righteous forever, this, something, is the secret way that guides us from this place today.'"

"This what?" Naruto asked, "Or is that a secret too?" Sakura shook her head, "It's like there's a word missing, but it's about the scrolls. I think we're supposed to open them now." She pulled one from inside her armor and handed it to Sasuke. She held onto the other one and the three of them swapped nervous glances before nodding. Sakura and Sasuke laid down the scrolls and cautiously broke the seals on them.

They edged them open cautiously and then Naruto reached over and caught Sakura and Sasuke's hands before they could open the scrolls any further as he saw the start of what was written on them, "Hold it, that's a summoning jutsu. We need to back up before we open them

all the way." Sasuke and Sakura looked at him and then heeded his advice, setting the scrolls down before nudging them the rest of the way open with their toes.

The paper bulged and white smoke billowed out as they backed up. A few moments later a familiar voice bellowed, "NARUTOOOOO! YOU WERE TOLD NOT TO OPEN THE--wait a minute..." Iruka stepped out of the smoke, "you're here already?!" He looked down and stared in shock as he saw both a Heaven and Earth scroll, "You passed the second stage that quickly?" He looked up at them, "That's incredible!"

"Hi Iruka sensei," Naruto said with a belated wave, "How ya doin?" Iruka blinked and then grinned, "Great! My students just destroyed the record for this test!" "What's the record?" Sakura asked. "Five and a half hours," Iruka replied with a grin as he adjusted his forehead protector, "It's only been one and a half since you guys started!" Naruto turned and raised his hands to Sakura and Sasuke for high fives which were quickly given.

Then they turned back to Iruka, "So what's up with the flashy entrance Iruka sensei?" Iruka smiled, "At the end of the second test we Chunin are supposed to welcome the test takers back and well, it was just good luck that I happened to be assigned the important task of being the messenger for you guys. Congratulations, you've passed the second exam. To celebrate I'd love to treat you all to some Ichiraku ramen," "That would be truly excellent," Naruto declared.

Iruka smiled, "Yes it would, but sadly you have to wait here until the end of the exam." A small noise of disapproval escaped Naruto as Iruka continued, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the instructions that had told them to open the scrolls, "And if you haven't figured out the writing on the wall, I'm supposed to explain that too." Naruto scratched his head for a moment, "Mmm...isn't that Lord Hokage's thing about training your weak spots? Heaven being your mind and earth your body?" Iruka nodded, "That's the one."

Iruka grinned, "Well, that was all I was supposed to do. Good luck with the third exam, and try not to go stir crazy cooped up in here for the next five days. See you soon!" With a quick hand sign and a burst of smoke he disappeared. Naruto's shoulders sagged slightly, "Five days? Ooogh..." he said with a slight shudder. "So what now?" Sasuke asked. Naruto's face suddenly split in a grin, "Now we go wait to congratulate Squad 8. The shadow clone I sent with Hinata just came back, they're right outside."

==Twenty Minutes Later==

"Hi guys! You made it early too?" Temari called. Teams 7 and 8 turned and saw the Sand Siblings walking up. Kankuro's left arm was in a sling and the right side of his face was solid purple as opposed to the usual pattern. Apparently Temari had been very serious about making him pay, Naruto thought, quietly hoping that she didn't bear any animosity towards Hinata like that. "Yeah, I didn't think it was going to be that easy," Kiba replied cheerfully, "Three chumps tried to ambush us, but we saw em comin and Shino fed em to some leeches."

An expression of disgust flitted across Temari's face, "Leeches?" "Yes," Shino replied, "Not unlike the one you have on the back of

your leg." Temari's expression went from shocked to panicked instantly as she twisted and tried to see it, brushing her hands over the backs of her legs, "\_GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF! \_\_\*\*GET IT OFF!\*\*\_" Shino laid a hand on her shoulder, "Calm down and hold still." He reached down and pulled something black and slimy off the back of her upper leg. Temari backed away quickly in disgust and horror as she got a look at the disgusting bloated thing. Once she felt she was a safe distance from it she twisted and tried to get a look at the spot where it had been.

"Gaara look at it, is it bad?" Gaara crouched down, "There's a hole in your stocking, it looks very red, and it is bleeding a bit, but you've had worse." "I can't feel it," Temari said with a note of urgency in her voice. "I'm not surprised," Shino replied, "Judging by its size, this leech has been on you for nearly an hour. I'm amazed you're still up walking around. A normal person would have to have been carried in. As is, you all need to check yourselves soon to make sure there aren't more."

Several hearts skipped a beat as Temari started sloughing off her outer layer of clothes immediately. They were slightly disappointed when they saw she had on a light black tank top and shorts on under her outer clothes, along with a form fitting black mesh suit under that, but it hugged her form tightly enough that they weren't \_too\_ disappointed as she hurriedly started twisting and craning her neck to look at every part of her body she could, "Gaara, there aren't any on my back are there?" Gaara looked at her back calmly, "No, that seems to have been the only one."

Kankuro scratched his head through his hood with his good arm, "Hey Gaara, we probably need to go check ourselves over too, we all walked through that bog." Gaara nodded, "Yes we should do that." He looked at the others, "I don't suppose you know where a bathroom would be located?" Naruto jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "I think I saw one back that way."

Shino looked at him, "Your team should probably go check yourselves over too Naruto, I kept our team clear of them, but you might've run into some. Also, everyone needs to check for small brown bugs. They're like leeches and they can carry disease, so we need to be sure there aren't any on us, and if there are we need to make sure we get a medic to look at it." He looked at Hinata and Kiba, "I've been exuding pheromones that repel them from our group, so we should be clear, but we should go see if we can find a medic in case anyone needs one, and Temari's leg needs to be checked and examined quickly to prevent any chance of infection."

He called after the others as they stampeded toward the bathrooms, "Be sure you check each other's hair thoroughly! They like to bite your scalp!" Shino sighed, "Am I the only one who bothered to look up what dangers are common to the swamp before I came in?" He sighed again and scratched his head, "I hope they've all had their vaccinations. Swamps breed some seriously nasty diseases." Kiba patted him on the shoulder, "Well for now, let's go find that medic. By the way, great job getting Temari out of her clothes like that, that was awesome." "I'm surprised more people didn't do it," Shino replied, "If I didn't know I was clean I would have done it too."

==Three Hours Later==

After an hour and a half of very thorough check overs, from each other and the medics Team 8 brought down, they had all taken showers involving extra thorough scrubbing. Thankfully Temari had been the only one to pick up an unwanted passenger, but they all scratched and shivered periodically as their subconscious minds continued to imagine things crawling on them.

Now they all sat around a table in one of the tower's lounges wrapped in plain white robes while their clothes were washed as Shino set down a tray of tea, "Drink this, you'll feel better afterwards." Temari quickly took a cup and downed it in one swallow, "I hate swamps," she declared. "Of course you do," Shino replied, "Swamps are about as opposite to the deserts you are most familiar with as it gets." Temari nodded, "Yeah. I am starting to feel a little better now, can I have some more?"

Shino nodded and poured her some more as she rubbed the bandage on her leg, "Try to drink a little more slowly this time, if you drink too much too fast you'll throw up." Temari nodded and sipped slower, "That's an odd flavor. What kind of tea is this?" "Wine," Shino replied calmly. Everyone stared, then started laughing, unsure if he was serious or not. Then Kiba sniffed his cup, "Yeah, that's wine."

Temari giggled, "Giving wine to us, you should be ashamed of yourself. It's illegal in the Sand Village." "Wine is one of the Leaf Village's main exports. Everyone drinks it here," Shino replied, "It would be entirely too difficult to enforce a drinking age here. Although if it's your first time drinking, then you should certainly take it slow or you'll be falling over drunk in no time." Temari giggled again, "Oh I'm sure we'll be fine."

==The Next Day==

Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke made their way down to the arena aiming to practice, only to find the Sand Siblings there already. Temari was stretching, Kankuro was tinkering with one of his puppets and Gaara was forming up a column of sand to use as a punching bag. He looked over at them as they came in, "Good morning."

"Not good morning!" Kankuro grumbled, "I've never had a headache this bad!" Temari laughed, "What's the matter Kankuro? Can't handle your wine?" Kankuro growled at her and muttered irritably under his breath. Temari grinned as she stretched her shoulders, "You guys here to practice too?" "Yep," Naruto replied before yawning, "Figured we should. The third test is combat, so we need to be ready." Temari smiled winningly, "Wanna spar with us?"

Naruto thought about refusing then smiled, it was Temari, she knew most of his tricks anyway, "Sure." Temari grinned, "Alright, who's fighting who?" "Why not fight as teams? That way we don't give away too many of our solo techniques to each other?" Gaara supplied as Sasuke and Sakura weighed the merit of sparring with potential opponents, "I know we fight very differently as a team than we do one on one."

Naruto looked at Sasuke and Sakura, "We do too." Sasuke finally nodded, "Alright, let's see what you guys can do." Kankuro grinned over his shoulder at them, "Full force anything goes or are we gonna

restrict it to taijutsu only?" They all swapped glances, "Taijutsu only I think," Temari said, setting her fan down, "We wouldn't want to demolish the arena before it's even show time." Gaara set his massive sand gourd off onto the ground, "Agreed. This arena isn't nearly big enough for the six of us to have a full on match. Shall we set a timer for three minutes? That should be plenty of time to get our blood pumping." They all nodded and he fished a little device with a dial from his pocket, "I'll set it for four minutes so Kankuro's puppet can get our gear clear."

Naruto grinned as Kankuro's puppet hurriedly moved Temari's fan and Gaara's gourd off to the sidelines with the timer and they all set up with each other. They gave each other some distance and then Naruto cast glances around at everybody, "Ready?" "Set?" Temari asked. "GO," they declared in unison. In an instant Temari leapt forward, a fist pulled back to nail Naruto only for him to fly out of the way as Sakura caught his tail and swung him around her before using the momentum to hurl him spinning at Gaara.

Gaara casually leapt out of the way and struck Naruto's side with the palm of his hand, sending him careering off course towards Kankuro. Kankuro launched himself upwards and almost landed a tremendous drop kick on Naruto, but Naruto stopped spinning just in time to throw his tail up as a shield and catch Kankuro's leg. Naruto twisted and yanked with his tail, slamming Kankuro into the ground before swinging him around to stop Gaara's advance and then spinning and hurling him at Temari who was going toe to toe with Sakura and Sasuke at the same time.

Temari ducked and Kankuro sailed into Sasuke, quickly wrapping around him like a snake and catching him in a wrestling hold. Temari leapt back to her feet and swung her body and elbow at Sakura. Sakura got her hand up to block the punch Temari's body telegraphed, but Temari's hand whiplashed around her blocking arm in a hook from behind where it was supposed to be and the inner edge of her hand connected soundly with Sakura's temple, sending her staggering backwards.

Temari leapt around her and twisted as she landed, driving an uppercut into Sakura that sent her flying backwards towards Sasuke and Kankuro. Sakura despite being slightly winded twisted midair and managed to plant her foot on Kankuro's face, loosening his grip on Sasuke but nearly taking Sasuke down with him. Sakura back flipped off Kankuro's face and managed to bounce off Gaara's back as he came rocketing through the air toward her. Sasuke wasn't quite as quick on the draw and Gaara coiled and kicked him in the chest, knocking him backward and stopping his own momentum on the spot.

Meanwhile Naruto had wrapped Temari in his tail and was struggling to keep her contained. Sakura leapt and slugged her as she broke free. Temari staggered and Naruto swept her feet out from under her with his tail, allowing Sakura to pin her to the ground with one arm pulled behind her back. Sasuke found himself being sat on by Kankuro as Gaara launched himself back at Naruto. Just as they were about to nail each other, the timer went off.

Naruto and Gaara both pulled their punches an inch from the others face and grinned, "Another draw," they said in unison with identical grins. They stepped back and clasped hands, "Good fight." As Sakura and Kankuro let Temari and Sasuke up a voice exclaimed from the

doorway, "A most excellent fight indeed, that was incredible!" They all turned and saw Lee, Neji and Tenten standing in the doorway bedraggled and worn out but all intact.

"I can't believe they beat us here," Tenten muttered to Neji as Lee rushed to introduce himself to the Sand Siblings. Neji nodded as Naruto introduced Lee to the Sand Siblings, "Guys, this here is Rock Lee and those are his teammates Tenten Shimura and Neji Hyuga. Lee, Tenten, Neji, these are the Shiroihebi siblings, Gaara, Temari and Kankuro." Lee bowed, "It is very nice to meet you." The Sand Siblings smiled and bowed back, "And you as well," Temari replied.

Lee straightened up, "I hate to be rude, but may I ask where we might find a shower? Our opponents put up an excellent fight when we battled for our scroll, and Tenten was hoping for a bath when we got here as she did an unfortunate face plant in the mud." Temari smiled, "Sure, I can show you where it is." "Thanks," Tenten smiled, "I got a lot of the mud out at the river, but I'll feel a lot better after a bath." "I know what you mean, sand I can handle but this swamp just ugh," Temari said with a grin as she led Tenten off down the hall.

Sakura suddenly remembered, "Wait! You guys need to get checked over by a medic for swamp bugs!" "Oh right," Temari said over her shoulder, "Ok Tenten, medic first \_then\_ bath. Come on we'll go see the lady that patched up my leg where that leech got me." She looked at Neji and Lee as she led Tenten back in the other direction, "Are you guys coming?" "We are," Neji replied as he turned and fell in step behind them, Lee hurrying to catch up.

==Two Days Later==

"Shikamaru can we \_please\_ go find something to eat now?" Choji groaned. "We can but only if you stop making me use my Shadow Possession Jutsu to frog march you and walk on your own feet," Shikamaru replied. "Okay!" Choji replied, perking up immediately. He suddenly took off and Shikamaru barely managed to release his Shadow Possession in time to avoid being dragged, "Where was this energy five minutes ago?" he asked Ino irritably. Ino sighed, "You know Choji."

"Hi guys," Sakura said from behind them. They both leapt straight to the ceiling and Ino actually managed to flip and hang there with her chakra. Shikamaru was too drained from frog marching Choji and simply landed. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE BILLBOARD BROW?" Ino barked. Sakura grinned up at her, "Well my team got here the first day, so I've been relaxing and training for the last three and a half days. You should have gotten here earlier Ino, it's been kind of like a party around here."

Ino flushed crimson with fury and embarrassment, Sakura had beaten her there by that much? Shikamaru stared, "You beat the test on the first day?" "Yep," Sakura replied cheerfully, "So did Squad 8 and the team from the Sand Village. Lee, Tenten and Neji all got here the next day, and there are two teams from Hidden Rain here too, but they don't really socialize much. I haven't seen them hardly at all really," she added thoughtfully.

"Anyway," she continued, "Shikamaru you need to go get Choji and drag him to the infirmary to get checked over for parasites. I'll show you

where the shower is Ino, you look like you need one," she added with a smirk. As Shikamaru headed down the hallway after Choji, Sakura and Ino headed for the baths. "I know Sasuke and Naruto did all the work," Ino spat out the side of her mouth, "There's no way you could've made it here on the first day alone." "And you probably wouldn't have made it at all without Shikamaru and Choji," Sakura replied and was rewarded by Ino's face turning crimson.

Ino quickly decided that arguing with Sakura in her current state wouldn't work and changed the subject, "It's still weird to think that Naruto's competent." "He's a lot more than that you know," Sakura said, "He did all the work getting our scroll. His Shadow Clones took it from another team and had it to us less than half an hour after the test started. Iruka sensei was so surprised when we got here!"

Ino looked at her, "When did you guys get here?" "An hour and a half after the test started. We set the new record, tied with Squad 8 and the Shiroihebi Siblings." "The who?" "The Shiroihebi siblings, the team from Hidden Sand. They're a lot of fun. Really tough too. I haven't seen their jutsu, but Naruto says they're as tough as anybody else here. He did say something about that one guy from Hidden Rain making his fur stand on end, but now that you're here there's twenty one of us. You probably won't have to fight him.

"You'd still better bring your A-game for the third exam Ino," she continued quietly, "I've been watching everybody. If their nin and genjutsu are anything like their taijutsu, you'll need your A-game to even put up a decent show against most of them. I haven't seen much of the Rain teams, but what I have seen is scary. They're both heavy combat teams judging by their taijutsu, and there's one, the one with the blindfold Naruto pointed out. I saw him sparring with one of his teammates yesterday.

"He's got something, I don't know what. Some kind of dojutsu behind that blindfold maybe, or something, but his hand speed is incredible. His teammate has to be as fast as Lee, but this guy stopped a full body high speed punch from him with one hand like it was nothing. The follow up punch was as strong as any I've ever seen. I'm amazed his teammate could still stand, let alone get up out of the rubble of the wall he was knocked through like it didn't happen, dust himself off and talk about what a weak punch it was."

Ino stared at her, "\_WEAK?\_" Sakura nodded as they turned into the baths, "That was our reaction too. I don't know if he was just being macho or if that was actually a light hit for them, but I don't want to find out the hard way either." Ino nodded as they stripped and headed into the baths, which were already steaming. There was someone else in there already, a young woman with waist length dark hair.

"\_WHAT IS THAT?!\_" Ino exclaimed pointing at the woman's back. "It's a scar," the woman replied coldly, "Never seen what happens when someone gets burned?" "Not that," Sakura replied as she walked over, "The leech." The woman turned to look at her wide eyed, "\_Leech?!\_" Sakura reached out and yanked the huge slimy thing off her back. The woman yelped and leapt away as she saw it, "WHAT IS THAT?!" Sakura held the disgusting thing against the wall and punched it so hard it exploded.

"That," she said calmly, "Was a leech. We need to check both of you thoroughly to make sure there aren't any more on you, and then we need to get you to a medic to clean and bandage that wound." The woman reached around and started feeling her back frantically, "\_Wound?!\_" Then she felt hot blood on her hand and went very pale. Sakura laid a hand on her shoulder, "Calm down, breathe. You're going to be okay. It was small. I don't think it could've been on you long, so you probably haven't lost too much blood. You're going to be okay."

The woman sucked in a breath that was trying to be deep but didn't make it past shallow and held it, trying not to be sick at the sight of her own blood staining Sakura's skin from where the leech had exploded. There was a retching noise and Sakura sighed, "Pull yourself together Ino, that's not helping."

While Ino finished emptying the contents of her stomach onto the shower floor, Sakura instructed the woman to turn around and sit down on one of the benches so she could inspect her hair. "You're from the Sound Village right?" Sakura asked as she combed her fingers through the long black hair. The woman nodded, still stiff as a board. "What's your name?" Sakura asked in a soothing tone. "Kin," she replied tersely, her hands clenched so tight her knuckles were white. Sakura nodded, "Okay, I'm Sakura from the Hidden Leaf Village, and this is my cousin Ino." "Nice to meet you," Kin said nervously as Sakura continued methodically checking through her voluminous black hair. Sakura didn't mention when she picked out and pinched a tiny brown beetle like Shino had warned them about to death, or when she crushed a second smaller leech into oblivion with one hand.

After a few minutes, she ran her fingers through Kin's hair one more time, "Okay, you're all clear. Just finish washing and go talk to a medic. If you wait for me to check Ino over, I'll walk you down there." "Thank you," Kin replied shakily. Sakura smiled, "No problem, we were all freaking out when we found out about those things." Kin nodded, still tense, but slightly calmer as Sakura moved over to Ino and started combing through her hair.

A few minutes later Sakura smiled, "Okay, as soon as you two are done washing we'll head down to the infirmary and then we can go get you two some food. Sound good?" Ino and Kin nodded and Sakura smiled, "Good, I'll see you two outside."

\_I'm sure you're wondering about how Naruto knew about Kabuto's history with the Chunin Exams. He knew the same way he knew about the aims of the first exam: He's watched them carefully for the past two years, spying when the tests weren't public.\_

\_You're probably also wondering why they had to stay in the tower until the end of the exam. The answer is simple: I wanted to show them interacting with the other teams and have some character development.\_

\_I'd guess you're probably also wondering about the last names I've assigned to the Sand Siblings and Tenten. It always bugs me when only half the characters have last names, so I'm assigning them as I see fit. For those of you who speak enough Japanese to understand the last name I assigned the Sand Siblings, if you figure it out, don't spoil it for the other readers.\_

\_Yes, Sakura and Ino are cousins now. Sakura's mom is blonde so I say it's possible, and with villages actually being \_\_\*\*villages\*\*\_\_ in Vermillion Thunder rather than the cities Kishimoto depicted, I think they could very easily be related. So now they are. Also I think it helps explain why they would continue to put up with each other and quarrel almost like siblings.\_

\_Yes Sakura did handle herself very well while dealing with Kin's unwanted passengers. This is because she still has potential to be trained as a medic, just like in canon, and I think medics should be able to comport themselves in a calm and appropriate manner and do what needs doing even when they are internally trying hard to keep their breakfast down. This is also a good trait I think for ninjas in general.\_

\_And last but not least, I'm sure those of you who noticed it are also wondering about the setting I described at the beginning of the chapter. Yes it is different from Kishimoto's Hidden Leaf Village in many ways. I will provide a more in depth description later as the story rolls along. In the event I make any supplemental material, I'll post it and include a link on my profile page. Until then, you'll just have to follow along and use your imagination.\_

## 11. Chapter 9,5: Cooped Up

=Chapter 9.5-Cooped Up=

==The Evening of Day 1 of the Chunin Exams Survival Test==

Temari downed another cup of wine in one gulp, the others had long since given up on trying to convince her to take it easy. Her face seemed stuck in smiley mode, and she had become quite boisterous as the amount of alcohol in her system had steadily risen. Shino hadn't had any after his first cup, but he had almost immediately become as boisterous as Temari, actually being doubled up laughing at Kankuro's drunken rambling and sock puppet show, which had steadily increased from funny to hilarious until he passed out.

Now Gaara was wrapped in a seal covered blanket like a bathrobe, woozily playing the saxophone he had pulled from a seal on his gourd, still managing to coax a drunken sleepy melody from it even though he was so drunk he couldn't even reach his cup to drink some more. Sakura had long since dragged Sasuke off to nobody was quite sure where but everyone could easily guess what. Naruto had refrained from drinking much, "I can get really short tempered when I'm drunk," he explained when Temari asked why he wasn't drinking, "And I do have a small buzz going and a gorgeous woman on either shoulder, so I'm happy."

Temari had nodded and curled a little closer to him as Hinata kissed him on the cheek with a smile. Kiba was on a couch lying on his belly and had tears rolling down his cheeks, "Akamaru, why does Naruto get two of the three gorgeous girls and I don't get any?" Akamaru whined in sympathy and then bounced over to Temari as she whistled, happily panting and wagging his tail as Temari scratched his ears, "Who's a good boy? You are, yes you are!" "Fetch?" Kiba asked plaintively, earning an explosion of laughter from everyone else who was still awake.

Shino nearly fell out of his chair laughing, "Cheer up Kiba! I'm sure you'll, I'm sure you'll find somebody!" he gave up trying not to laugh and howled with laughter, curling into a ball clutching his stomach as he convulsed with laughter. Kiba groaned, "I'm going to bed now," he stood up and promptly fell back onto the couch, "Or not..." Shino actually did finally fall out of his chair and roll on the floor laughing. After a few minutes he managed to calm down enough to catch his breath and stand up, "Okay Kiba, I'll, I'll help you out, come on."

He took a step and had to catch hold of a chair to steady himself, "I may need some help myself!" he laughed before pulling himself along the furniture to Kiba, "Come on Kiba, let's get you to bed, you're drunk." Kiba pushed himself partially upright and then managed to stand, bracing on Shino's shoulder, "Thanks Shino. You're a good friend. Akamaru," he tried to whistle but only managed to splutter. Temari smiled at Akamaru, "Go on." Akamaru bounced over and padded along beside Kiba as he and Shino stumbled along, wagging his tail happily.

A few minutes after they left, Temari, Naruto and Hinata jumped as Gaara suddenly snored tremendously. Temari frowned, "Naruto, Gaara's, sleep...can you...needs his blanket..." Naruto nodded, still largely sober, "Yeah, I'll get him." He folded his hands into a hand sign, "Shadow Clone Jutsu..." Another Naruto popped into existence and wearily walked over to Gaara, catching his seal covered blanket and wrapping it tightly around him before patting Gaara on the head, "Shukaku no rampagey," he declared with a yawn before disappearing with a \_poof\_.

Temari giggled and then went to sleep and started snoring immediately, but unlike Gaara's loud almost comical KO-O-OA-AGH, hers was a quiet little \_shhh\_ sound, almost like the wind rustling. Naruto smiled and pulled her and Hinata closer. Hinata smiled, "She's fun, I see why you like her." Naruto smiled, "She is, and I do," then he leaned down and kissed her as she looked up at him, "but I love you." Hinata smiled and laid her head on his chest with what was almost a purr before falling asleep. Naruto smiled up at the ceiling and then fell asleep with a smile.

==The Next Afternoon==

Anko set down a coffee pot on the table and plopped down on the couch across from Sakura and Sasuke, "Hi guys." "Hi Anko-sensei," Sakura replied with a smile, the smile quickly turned to a concerned look as Anko slumped in her seat, "Are you alright?" "I can't wait for this to be over," Anko grumbled, "I've been dragging genin out of this forest since yesterday. At least Naruto had the decency to toss out those three chumps you guys beat, everyone else has just left their opponents where they dropped. I'm glad they're not helping their enemies, it's a bad practice to get into, but at the same time it's a pain in the ass for everyone proctoring this exam to have to patrol the forest and drag the fallen out before they get eaten."

Anko leaned forward and poured herself a cup of coffee, "I talked to Kakashi, he's very proud of all three of you, says don't let yourselves relax too much," she yawned, "you know all that sort of stuff." She sullenly took a drink, "Can't believe half a dozen teams have passed already..." Sakura and Sasuke blinked and then tried to count the teams they had met, "Us, Squad 8, Squad 9, the

Shiroihebi's...that's only four..."

Anko nodded, "Two teams from Hidden Rain just made it in a little over an hour ago, they were tag teaming and taking out as many teams as they could. We've found at least half a dozen teams they beat the crap out of. Dunno why they stopped, I watched their last fight, they could've beaten any solo team still in the forest easily. I wouldn't put money against them in a team fight against anyone already here. Even my kids, and I'd rather have them on my side than anyone short of the Sannin or maybe Kakashi."

Sasuke and Sakura blinked, "Kids?" Anko nodded, "The Shiroihebi siblings are basically my adoptive niece and nephews. Their dad and I go way back so I'm their favorite Auntie Anko." She straightened up and looked around, "Speaking of which, where are those three? I wanted to congratulate them." Sakura thought for a moment, "I think I saw Temari going off with Hinata and Naruto, but then I saw one of her shadow clones going off with Naruto and another one with Hinata, so I'm not really sure where she actually is."

Anko blinked and then started snickering before bursting out laughing. Sasuke and Sakura frowned in confusion, then Temari walked out from behind them, blushing furiously and trying to keep a straight face as she sat down next to Anko, "Hi Auntie Anko." Anko poked her in the shoulder, "So whatcha doing with them shadow clones Temari? Playing poker?" Temari blushed even more and bit her lip trying not to laugh as Anko absolutely howled with laughter at her expression, then Kankuro strolled by, "Sounded like wrestling practice to me." He promptly ran as Temari yelled, "KANKUROOO!" and sprang up, quickly chasing him out of the room.

Sakura suddenly blushed as pink as her hair as she realized what Temari, Naruto and Hinata's shadow clones were doing. She stood up, "Excuse us Anko-sensei, Sasuke and I need to try something." She caught Sasuke's hand and dragged him to his feet and out the door. Anko blinked and then burst out laughing again.

A few moments later Gaara floated by, hanging upside down from a cloud of sand as he played a saxophone, pausing his playing to say, "Hi Auntie. We made it." Anko smiled up at him, "I see that. Gaara, are you drunk?" Gaara hovered and spun slowly, "Not anymore...I'm just sleepy now...it was fun though. Do you think we should tell dad?" Anko smiled, "I don't think he'll care, but your mom might not be too happy." Gaara nodded, "Ok, don't tell him about Temari and Naruto, I don't think Temari really wants everyone to know. Of course Kankuro probably...whoops, here we go again..." his sand cloud had started floating off and he waved, "Bye Auntie Anko, it was nice to see you."

Anko snorted with a smile, "Man, my Chunin Exam was never this fun..." She downed her coffee and rose with a sigh, "guess I'd better get back to it now."

==That Night==

Gaara's eyes flicked open and he frowned. He never slept particularly well, but it was rare for him to actually wake up. He sat up and looked around as he heard someone singing and realized that must've been what had woken him. Everyone else was still sound asleep though. He focused in on the voice and found himself entranced, it was the

most beautiful voice he'd ever heard. He got up and followed it, a paranoid part of his mind screaming, \_"GENJUTSU!"\_ and the vast majority of him not caring if it was as he stepped out into the hall and tried to find the source of the voice, hurrying along to catch up as he heard it fading to his left.

\_ "ain't it great the way it all begins, in Amegakure?\_

\_ Right away you're makin time and makin frie-ends.\_

\_ No one cares who you were yesterday, \_

\_ If they pick you out you're on your way, \_

\_ to a once upon a time that never eeends!"\_

Gaara cautiously poked his head around every corner he came to, not wanting to interrupt the song, but at the same time dying to know if the singer was as beautiful as her voice. When he finally caught a glimpse of her he flattened himself against the wall, she was even \_more\_ beautiful than her voice...

\_ "So little Sokushi don't be shy,\_

\_ Get out there and go and try,\_

\_ Believing that you're the one,\_

\_ They're dying to see..."\_

The voice choked back a sob suddenly and Gaara almost ran to catch up, a wild urge to hug the unknown singer racing through him as he realized how utterly miserable she sounded now that he realized it,

\_ "Cause a dream's no crime,\_

\_ Not once upon a time,\_

\_ Once upon a time, in Amegakure..."\_

She started up the stairs to one of the tower's many terraces and Gaara cautiously crept after her, waiting at the bottom of the stairs as she walked out onto the terrace and continued,

\_ "If it's always once upon a time, in Amegakure,\_

\_ Then why does nightfall find you feelin so alooone?\_

\_ How could anyone stay starry eyed,\_

\_ When it's rainin cats and dogs outside,\_

\_ And the rain keeps saying, \_(sob)

\_ Now you're on your ooown!"\_

She paused for a moment to cry and Gaara was about to start up the stairs when she continued, a note of hope entering into her voice,

\_ "So Sokushi don't be scared, \_  
\_ Though yesterday no-one cared, \_  
\_ They're getting your place prepared, \_  
\_ Where you want to beee... \_  
\_ Keep your dream alive, \_  
\_ Dreamin is still how the strong survive, \_  
\_ That's how we all survive, in Amegakure..." \_

She finally finished and Gaara went up the stairs. He found her sitting on the terrace, her arms around her knees as she stared up at the moon. She didn't notice his quiet footsteps until he was sitting down next to her and she jumped, quickly wiping the tears from her eyes, "Who are you? What do you want?" Gaara looked at her out the corner of his eye, noting how stunning she was in the moonlight, "I'm Gaara. You have a very beautiful voice, may I ask your name?"

She blinked and blushed as a smile crept across her face, "You heard that?" Gaara nodded, "It was beautiful." She played with her long white hair, "Oh no, I'm, I'm just a screeching alley cat..." Gaara snorted out a laugh, "You are far from screeching, my sister is one of the best singers in the Hidden Sand Village, and she'd probably tear her own throat out to be able to sing like you." The girl smiled, "Maybe I shouldn't sing around her then."

Gaara smiled, "Maybe." They were quiet for a moment and then, "You still haven't told me your name." She smiled, "I'm Sokushi, Sokushi Misutsuyu." "It's very nice to meet you Sokushi," Gaara replied with a smile, "I'm not sure I've ever heard that song before." Sokushi blushed, "Oh it's, just a little thing they used to sing us at the orphanage." Gaara blinked, "Orphanage?" Sokushi nodded and set her chin on her knees, "Yeah, Amegakure, that's the local name for the Hidden Rain Village, is right in the middle of the Lands of Lightning, Water and Fire, so there are a lot of people who get wounded and settle down there, and a lot of people die in all the fighting, so there's a lot of orphans too."

She sighed, "Most of us go into Hidden Rain's shinobi training program, if we're healthy enough. One of my best friends growing up had a bad leg, I talked the recruiter that brought me into the program into getting him a desk job. He's doing really well now, last time I talked to him he had just had surgery to get his leg fixed. The doctor says he should be able to walk soon." She smiled, "I just wish I could've helped all the others that much."

Gaara wrapped an arm around her, "Maybe one day you will." Sokushi smiled, "Yeah, maybe." They sat there talking for a long time and before they knew it they had dozed off. When Gaara woke up the next morning, Sokushi was already gone. Gaara smiled at the spot on his shoulder where her head had been as he realized he had slept well for the first time in his life, and then got up and went down to breakfast.

Temari was already there, as were Naruto and Hinata. He didn't notice

they were staring until he sat down, "What?" Temari grinned, "Don't you what us! Who's the lucky girl?" Gaara blinked in confusion, "what?" Temari crossed her arms, "Don't tell me you drew that lipstick on your cheek?" Gaara's blushed immediately as his hand flew to his cheek and Temari started laughing.

Before anyone asks, yes that is an adaptation of "Once Upon A Time In New York City" by Huey Lewis, I happen to love that song and it fits here, so I borrowed it. I make no claim to it what-so-ever.\_

Yes Anko knows the Kazekage, make of that what you will.\_

Yes Gaara has a blanket laced with seals which keeps Shukaku from getting loose while he sleeps.\_

Yes Gaara plays a saxophone and is well known on Hidden Sand's pleasure radio station as "Gaara of the Funk". Kankuro uses his puppets to be the entire rest of the band by himself. This has contributed to their popularity with the ladies of Hidden Sand tremendously. Temari doesn't sing often, but when she does every guy who hears her is left clamoring for her attention.\_

## 12. Chapter 10: The Preliminaries Begin!

=Chapter 10-Narrowing The Field: Preliminaries To The Third Exam Begin!=

==The Night The Applicants From The Other Villages Arrived in Hidden Leaf==

"Thank you for seeing me Lord Hokage. I apologize for the late hour," Hattori said as he stood before the Hokage's desk. "It is an unexpected honor to have you here Lord Hanzo," Lord Hokage replied, "I was very surprised to learn you were coming. I hope your father is doing well?" "He's only rarely been better actually," Hattori said with a smile behind his mask, "In fact that's part of why I was sent to see you."

Lord Hokage tilted his head inquisitively, "Oh?" Hattori nodded, "I've come as an intermediary from the Village Hidden in the Mist. My father has been promoted to Mizukage and wishes to extend Rain's alliance with Leaf to the Mist village." Lord Hokage nearly had a minor stroke, "Hanzo senior is the new Mizukage?"

Hattori nodded, "Yes. As a gesture of good faith, we've found one of your most notorious Missing Nin for you." He held out a hand and the young woman accompanying him handed him a rolled up piece of paper which he handed to Lord Hokage. Lord Hokage opened it and sucked in a startled breath as he saw the picture on it, "Where is he?" "He's holed up with a collection of S-Rank Missing-Nin from various villages. We understand Lord Jiraiya of the Sannin has been keeping an eye on this group for a while now. We thought we would extend you an offer to collaborate with Hidden Leaf forces in our coming attempt to capture these Missing Nin. It promises to be an immensely profitable outing to be sure."

"How many are with him?" Lord Hokage asked. "Aside from the village's worth of flunkies they've assembled, six S-Rank Missing Nin. Two from Rain, one from Mist, one from Stone, one from Waterfall and one from

Steam," Hattori replied. He suddenly reached up and shed his mask, revealing the Rinnegan, "I encourage you not to act rashly. Their leader is from Rain, and bears a stage six Rinnegan. It took me and my father together to deal with just him, and there are six more S-ranks including yours."

Lord Hokage nodded, "Thank you for this information. We will certainly be willing to extend our alliance to Mist while Lord Hanzo is Mizukage." Hattori bowed, "Thank you Lord Hokage."

A chunin suddenly poked his head in, "Excuse me Lord Hokage, there is someone here to see you." Lord Hokage looked at Hattori, then back at the chunin, "Who is it? Can't you see I'm a little busy?" Hattori turned and his eyes widened, "Lord Hokage, I would let them in." Lord Hokage looked at him and then nodded, "Very well, show them in."

A few minutes later the doors were flung open by two samurai wearing the colors of the Emperor. An official in similar Imperial garb strode through, "I bear a message from the Imperial City to the Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves." Lord Hokage nodded, "Proceed." "His Imperial Highness Prince Koga Tokugawa, has decided to attend the third round of this year's Chunin Exams between the Villages hidden in the Leaves, Sand, Rain, Grass, Sound and Waterfall. He looks forward to meeting the Hokage, Kazekage and any other Village Heads in attendance. That is all."

He turned smartly on his heel and strode out, the two samurai swiftly following him. Those left in the room stared, "The crown prince is coming?" Hattori said quietly. He turned and bowed to Lord Hokage, "If you'll excuse me Lord Hokage, I must go alert my teams to the higher standard they're going to be held to now." Lord Hokage nodded, "Very well. You will be attending the Third Round I take it?" "Of course," Hattori replied with a smile, "Two of our teams are being led by my former teammates, I wouldn't miss this for the world."

==Morning, Day 6==

Squad 10 and the Sound Team had been the last applicants to make it in, and now the twenty four remaining applicants stood in the arena in three rows with their teams facing front. Lord Hokage was there, along with all the Jonin instructors, Ibiki Morino, Anko Mitarashi and a handful of other ninja who had been helping proctor the exam.

Anko spoke into a bullhorn, which was unnecessary, "First of all, congratulations on finishing the second exam. Alright, now listen up! Lord Hokage is going to explain the third exam to you, you better listen carefully maggots." Lord Hokage cleared his throat, "Before I explain the third test to you, I want to explain something about the exams to you. It's something all of you need to understand."

"I'm going to tell you the true purpose of these exams. Why do you suppose our country holds this exam in conjunction with our allies?" With no answer immediately forthcoming he answered his own question, "To raise the ability levels of shinobi and increase friendship between allied nations to be sure, but there is also another purpose. It is important that you understand this, the exams are so to speak a representation of the battle between allied nations. These exams allow for a place where shinobi can fight with the pride of their

nation on their backs and their lives on the line. Many leaders and people of prominence are invited to these exams as guests, and also to seek shinobi to work for them. Those countries whose candidates do well receive an influx of business and those who do not lose business. This exam could determine the course of the rest of your careers as ninja."

Naruto grinned, "Well, I'm convinced," he muttered to himself. "Any test is fine, just tell us what we have to do," Gaara said. Lord Hokage nodded, "Very well I will now explain to you the details of the third exam." A jonin suddenly materialized in front of him on one knee, "Lord Hokage, before you do, please allow me, Hayate Gecko appointed proctor of the third exam, to speak first." Lord Hokage nodded and Gecko rose, "It's nice to meet you all. There is something I would like all of you to do before the third exam."

He turned to face them, "We have to have a preliminary exam before we can move onto the real one." There was a wave of questions and protests to which he replied, "You see the first and second exams might have been too easy. The truth is we didn't expect so many of you to make it this far. The rules state that a preliminary can be held at any stage to reduce the number of remaining candidates. You see we're inviting a lot of important people, we can't waste their time. They're coming to see the best of the best. So if any of you feel you're in less than top physical condition, this is your opportunity to bow out. The preliminaries will be starting immediately."

"Oh, one more thing, the winners will be determined by one on one combat, so like I said, if there's anyone who doesn't feel up to it, now's the time to raise your hand." No hands were raised and he nodded, "Alright then. We'll now begin the preliminary round. This round will consist of one on one combat, full battle intensity. This is not an exercise. There are twenty four of you. There will be twelve matches. Surviving candidates will advance to the third exam."

"As for the rules," he continued, "There are none. You will fight until one of you dies, is rendered physically incapable of continuing or concedes defeat. Those who are losing are encouraged to concede defeat promptly so as to avoid a fatal outcome. As proctor, I am allowed some leeway in determining the matches, and if I determine that a match is hopeless I may step in to preserve as many lives as possible. Now it's time to reveal what fate has been chosen for you." He looked over his shoulder, "Anko?"

Anko nodded and raised her bullhorn, "Turn on the projector!" A projector flickered to life somewhere and a panel of the back wall was rendered a screen. "The names of the combatants will be chosen completely at random and displayed on the screen. As there's nothing more to say, let's begin. In a moment the names of the first two opponents will appear."

Hand written names were suddenly placed in front of the projector, showing up backwards at first until the projectionist turned them around. "Naruto Uzumaki and Kiba Inuzuka," Gecko announced, "Will everyone else please clear the arena floor?" Naruto and Kiba strode to face each other as the floor was hurriedly cleared. Gecko looked at them, "You two have been chosen as the combatants for the first match, are there any objections?" "None here," Kiba grinned. "Nor

here," Naruto replied. Gecko nodded, "Then if you're ready, let the match..."

==Feral Throwdown! Kiba vs. Naruto!==

"Begin!" Naruto slid into his stance as Kiba immediately activated his All Fours Jutsu, using his chakra to warp his body so that he could move and fight like a wolf. An instant later, Kiba shot forward like a cannon ball, whirling as he flew so that he looked like the business end of an angry drill. Naruto leapt upward and over him. Kiba smashed into the wall and shook his head as he turned back around, preparing for another attack. Naruto landed on his toes, "So that's how you want to play huh? Fine then. Transform!"

Naruto glowed with chakra for a moment and then a blast of smoke later he was a huge fox with nine tails the size of a very large horse. Kiba's concentration was immediately thrown by being confronted with the Leaf Village's worst nightmare. Then Naruto roared and sprang at him.

Up in the stands, almost every Jonin present had tensed at Naruto's form change. Neji activated his Byakugan instinctively and then crossed his arms, "Naruto's certainly not pulling any punches is he? Taking a form like that. Even if it's not the real thing, that's still very bold." Tenten looked at him, "You mean that's not the Nine Tails?!" Neji shook his head, "No, that's still all Naruto's chakra. He just took that form to freak Kiba out." Guy clapped Tenten on the shoulder, "No Tenten, the real Nine Tailed Fox is too big for this arena to hold. I don't know if this tower would even reach its knee." Tenten stared then looked back down at the arena, "And Naruto's got that monster inside him?"

Guy nodded, "Yep, I hate to say it, but I don't think poor Kiba stands a chance in this fight." His words were accentuated by one of Naruto's tails connecting with one of the two Kibas now shooting around the room and smacking him into the ground with brutal force. The Kiba exploded into a burst of smoke and was revealed to be an unconscious Akamaru. "AKAMARU!" Kiba yelled only to be back handed by one of Naruto's hand like forepaws.

Naruto growled a warning as Kiba tried to get back up. Kiba stared, could this really be Naruto? "Don't get up Kiba," Naruto warned, "You've lost. If you keep trying to fight me, I won't continue to hold back." Kiba's arms threatened to give out from under him and Naruto looked at Gecko, "Call it ref. I felt ribs crack when I hit him. I have no desire to hurt my friend any more than I already have and I'm going to have to if he gets up." Gecko nodded and raised a hand, "The winner is Naruto Uzumaki." Naruto turned back to himself in an instant and turned to check on Akamaru, "You alright little guy?" Akamaru whined.

Naruto crossed his arms, "Well I'm sorry but you shouldn't have tried to bite me." He picked Akamaru up and carried him over to Kiba as the medics came in. "Thanks Naruto," Kiba said weakly, "Guess I should've seen that coming. When did you get so strong?" Naruto smiled, "When nobody was looking. Good fight. Now go rest up. I'll letcha know how the rest of the fights go." Kiba grinned as the medics carried him out on a stretcher, "Thanks. See ya later."

Naruto jumped up to the upper level where the other Hidden Leaf

candidates were waiting with the Sand Siblings, "Well that's my match done." "That was, kind of mean Naruto," Hinata said gently, "Did you really have to hit Kiba that hard?" Naruto smiled, "I didn't hit him that hard. I lied about feeling his ribs break. He'll have some bruises, nothing more." "Oh, that's good," Hinata said, perking up immediately.

"The next match," Gecko announced from down on the floor, "Kankuro Shiroihebi against Teibo Burekano." Kankuro grinned and hefted his bandage wrapped puppet, "Well, looks like I'm up! Wish me luck!" "It's all bad!" Temari teased. "Haha," Kankuro said dryly as he headed for the stairs.

==The Puppet Master and The Peril Of The Creeping Shroom!==

Teibo Burekano wasn't much to look at. In fact, with his straw hat on, he looked a bit like a chubby little blue mushroom with a brown cap as he hopped down the stairs one at a time and waddled across the arena floor with quick little steps that made his legs appear no longer than fingers.

Gecko looked between them his mouth twitching as he tried not to grin, "Ready? Begin!" Kankuro was having a very hard time not cracking up as he set his puppet on the ground and narrowly resisted the urge to jump for joy, surely this had to be the easiest opponent in the room! He couldn't have been more than three feet tall! He had to \_hop\_ down the stairs for crying out loud!

Then Teibo opened his mouth and where Kankuro expected a squeak, instead came a voice as large and deep as the ocean, "NINJA ART, DON'T LAUGH AT MY VOICE JUTSU!" Of course, everyone in the arena immediately began snickering and then burst out laughing. Kankuro doubled over and clutched his knees he was laughing so hard. He wasn't the only one either.

Then Teibo jumped ten feet across the arena and hit him in the head with a hammer that was half as big as he was. Kankuro hit the ground hard and stunned as Teibo stood over him, hefting his hammer for another swing. "\_I told you not to laugh!\_" Teibo yelled in a voice as squeaky as it had been deep a moment earlier. Kankuro managed to quickly roll out of the way and avoid getting his head smashed in by the immense hammer. Then Teibo went chasing after him, swinging his hammer wildly, "\_Stop laughing at my voice!\_"

Kankuro of course could do no such thing. The whole thing was just too absurd. He was however able to easily outpace the surprisingly quick little ninja. Teibo chased him around the arena for almost three minutes, "\_Come back here you puss filled boil! I'm gonna smash you so hard you'll be asking me how the weather is!\_" Kankuro kept running, laughing too hard to even think of turning and fighting as Teibo continued to yell increasingly elaborate and hilarious insults and threats at him.

Suddenly he became aware that Teibo had stopped chasing him and was flashing his hands through an activation sequence, "\_Ninja art spore clone jutsu!\_" Kankuro suddenly felt something on his back, quickly gaining weight. Kankuro looked up and found a clone of Teibo standing on his shoulder, "\_Hiya stinky!\_" POOM! The Teibo clone smacked Kankuro right in the face with his hammer so hard that Kankuro actually flew out from under the clone's feet and was knocked

backwards across the arena.

Kankuro sat up spitting blood, "Okay, that's it, no more playing around." "\_I couldn't agree more!\_" Teibo replied from right behind him. Kankuro tried to leap to his feet and only made it half way before Teibo hit him in the top of the head. Suddenly a dozen more Teibo's appeared and leapt to pile on top of him. "\_Ha!\_" one of them exclaimed. "\_You shall forever more remember this as the day you fell at the hands of Teibo Burekano! Hidden Rain's mightiest mushroom ninja!\_" The Teibo clones all stood up and raised their hands, "\_FEAR THE SHROOOOOM!\_" They yelled.

"Okay, that's enough," Kankuro said. Suddenly there was a whirl of metal that shredded all the Teibo clones away at once. They all exploded into gray powder and the original Teibo jumped up and down angrily, "\_What is that thing?!\_" Kankuro sat up in a pile of bandages near his original position, his hand poised like it was operating a marionette, "Mushroom Man, meet Crow, my puppet."

The Crow's many blades retracted as it rose and started to shamble after Teibo. Teibo shrank in surprise for a minute and then his eyes narrowed, "Shredding my spore clones was the worst mistake you've made yet!" He declared in a raspy new voice that was anything but funny. Just as Kankuro's eyes widened, Teibo flashed his hands through another activation sequence, "Ninja Art! Instant Decay!" Mushrooms suddenly exploded all over Crow and in seconds there was nothing left of the Crow but rotted wood and its metal components in a pile of mushrooms.

"My Crow!" Kankuro shouted in horror. Then Teibo yelled, "Ninja Art Mushroom Champion!" All the mushrooms that had destroyed Crow suddenly moved toward Teibo in a rapid amorphous mass. In an instant they flowed up his body and began to multiply. Before Kankuro could react, Teibo was clad in a ten foot tall suit of mushrooms. "Who's laughing now?!" Teibo yelled as he swung at Kankuro with a huge mushroom fist. Kankuro leapt aside and narrowly avoided the tremendous impact.

Kankuro grinned, "Well now that would be me." Teibo suddenly felt something sharp prick the back of his shoulder. He looked over his shoulder and saw the terrible visage of the Crow leering at him, a long needle retracting into its mouth, "What?! But how?! I destroyed that thing!" Kankuro grinned, "Yeah, but I'm the best there is at emergency puppet repair!"

Teibo's eyes started burning and watering as Kankuro called, "You'd better quit now! That needle was poisoned! You'll be unconscious in five minutes. It'll only be about two if you don't get your pulse down." Teibo growled, "Fine, you win." His mushrooms collapsed and Gecko declared Kankuro the winner. "Alright now where's the antidote?" Teibo demanded.

Kankuro smiled, "Well actually I lied about the needle. Normally it's loaded with deadly poison, but I unloaded it for the exam since we're not supposed to kill anybody. You've just got sand in your eyes." Teibo stared and then turned red. He pointed a finger at Kankuro, he started to say something, stopped, then nodded. He put his hands on his hips, "\_Ve-ry clever. You win this round Kankuro of Sand! But you have not seen the last of Teibo Burekano the Mushroom Ninja!\_" he added with a shake of his tiny fist before waddling back off to the

stands.

Kankuro rewrapped the Crow and slung it over his back with a grin, "I'll keep it in mind!" He called. Then he walked back up to the Leaf and Sand's side of the stands and grinned, "Well I think that was possibly the most bizarre fight I've ever had." He frowned as he heard snickers behind him. He turned around and looked at Teams Guy and Kurenai, "What's so funny?" then he heard more snickering from behind his back and frowned, "He stuck a "Kick Me" sign to my back didn't he?"

### 13. Chapter 11: The Preliminaries Heat Up!

Chapter 11-The Preliminaries Heat Up! Hidden Rain's Incredible Ferocity!

==Fury of the Striking Thunderer! Gaara's Power Unleashed!==

The next set of names flashed onto the screen and Kankuro pointed, "Hey Gaara, looks like you're up!" Gaara nodded, "Indeed it does." He rose on a platform of sand and floated down to the arena floor, landing at the same time as his opponent, a highly muscle bound young man with spiky black hair in a black shirt and pants. Gaara's sand platform coalesced into a ring of writhing sand tendrils around his feet as he advanced forward to the starting position.

Gecko looked at them, "Alright, third match, Gaara Shiroihebi against Wakai Sandara. Ready? Begin!" Wakai shot forward almost too fast to see. Gaara's sand snapped up and caught Wakai's hand every bit as fast. Gaara's eyes were barely open even as Wakai began to circle his defensive ring of sand at such speeds he was little more than a blur. After about the tenth hit, Gaara didn't bother catching Wakai's hand, instead his sand surged upward in the shape of a fist and sent Wakai to the ground.

Gaara turned as his sand coiled around Wakai's legs and with a flick of his hand hurled Wakai across the ring. Wakai dissolved into a puddle of water and the real Wakai appeared behind Gaara, "You're fast!" Gaara dodged his punch by a hairs breadth as he continued, "But I'm faster!" twisting and actually managing to kick Gaara out of his defensive ring of sand before disappearing again before the sand could snare him.

He suddenly hit Gaara in the stomach with a kick hard enough to knock him flying backwards across the ring. Wakai held his pose for a second, then his eyes widened as Gaara dissolved into a pile of sand. Before he could move, the sand had him. Gaara's sand arms slammed Wakai into the ground several times before slithering away to form back up around the real Gaara, who was revealed to be over near where Wakai's water clone had broken.

Wakai started picking himself up. "Stay down," Gaara told him, "You fought well, but you're out of your league." Wakai rose to his feet, "Oh no, I'm not quitting. I never quit, and now, you've made me angry." His hands flashed through an activation sequence and his whole body started to crackle with lightning, "Rage of the Thunderer!" His body was silhouetted inside a shroud of lightning as he shot forward, chasing Gaara as he shot around the ring on another floating sand platform. He effortlessly dodged Gaara's sand attacks

which slammed into the ground repeatedly with the force of an avalanche trying to hit him.

"You are indeed fast!" Wakai roared, "But what happens when I'm \_faster?!\_" He suddenly appeared right in front of Gaara, his fist pulled back for a devastating punch. His fist snapped out too fast to see, but just as everyone flinched, expecting to see Gaara go flying, they heard a loud WHOOMPH. They looked on in awe as Wakai struggled to free his hand from a massive sand claw Gaara had materialized around his hand.

Wakai threw another punch too fast to see and Gaara caught that too. "What happens when you think you're faster?" Gaara asked menacingly, "You find out that I'm full of surprises." Gaara's sand held Wakai spread eagled and Gaara moved into a stance, "Now then, this time," a gauntlet of sand formed around his hand, hardening instantly to the density of steel, "Stay..." He threw a punch into Wakai with such force that Wakai went flying backwards clear across the arena and slammed into the wall, "DOWN!"

Gaara's sand platform dissipated beneath him and as he dropped to the floor, he yelled, "Desert Meteor Storm!" Wakai was trying to pick himself up, but Gaara's sand platform suddenly became a hundred rock hard globs that bombarded him from every direction. By the time Gaara let up the merciless barrage, Wakai was unconscious, beaten and bloody, his lightning shroud fizzling out. Gaara's sand flew back to him, continuing to hover around him in a cloud of menace. "Don't make me tell you again," Gaara warned.

Gecko walked over to Wakai, and looked him over before raising a hand, "The winner is-" \_POOM!\_ Wakai disappeared with a sound like a thunder clap and suddenly reappeared inside Gaara's defenses, delivering a tremendous full body punch that sent Gaara flying backward almost ten feet and rolling another fifteen. Gaara looked at him and clenched his fist, "Sand coffin." Wakai disappeared from the center of the cloud of sand as it slammed closed like a steel trap. He reappeared above Gaara, a fist pulled back and sheathed in lightning ready to deliver a devastating final blow.

Just as he was about to connect, Gaara pulled a substitution, and Wakai's fist slammed into Gaara's sand. Before even Wakai could react, the sand trapped his hand and legs. Gaara made a crushing and yanking motion with his hand, "Sand burial!" Wakai screamed in pain and collapsed as the sand around his legs and arm suddenly imploded on his trapped limbs and pulled with tremendous force. There was no doubt, his arm and legs were very broken. Gaara wasn't done though. His sand slithered away slightly before suddenly turning back into a cloud of fists and unleashing another Desert Meteor Storm on Wakai's helpless form.

"Now when I tell you to stay down," Gaara said quietly as his sand retreated back into his gourd, "Stay down."

Gecko ran over and this time he was faster, "The winner is Gaara Shiroihebi!"

==Blind Determination in the Face of Blind Destruction==

The next match was being announced even as Wakai was being carried out. "The fourth match, Rock Lee against Dai Uzumaki!" Everyone on

the Leaf and Sand side of the arena stared, "UZUMAKI?!" Gaara turned and stared as one of the Rain genin leapt over the rail and landed on the arena floor, punching it with such force that the massive block tile he landed on shattered.

He rose and they saw that beneath his blazing red hair he was blindfolded. He wore a black cloak around his shoulders that obscured much of his upper body and black pants. As he rose, Gaara felt a chill run down his spine and leapt up and away from the blindfolded ninja as fast as he could. He landed on a sand platform and willed it to rise quickly as sweat broke out all over his body. He caught Lee as Lee leapt into the arena, "You need to be careful with this one. He's far stronger than the others."

Lee raised an eyebrow then nodded, "Thank you, I will keep it in mind." Gaara nodded, his whole body still tense even ten feet off the ground and twenty from the blindfolded ninja who seemed to be looking at them right through his blindfold. As Lee leapt to the floor below and settled into fighting position, Gaara landed next to Naruto, "I see what you mean. He's dangerous. He's on our level, and murderous to boot."

Naruto nodded, "I know. I just hope Lee can handle whatever this guy's packing." Gaara's eyes were wide as Gecko called "Begin!" "We're about to find out." Dai suddenly moved too fast to see and hit Lee in the chest with a flat handed strike that knocked him straight backward into the wall with such force Naruto was certain he felt it shake a little. Lee staggered out from beneath the viewing balcony and resumed his fighting stance before charging.

He proceeded to open up a series of incredibly fast and hard strikes that would have devastated any ordinary opponent. Dai blocked everything he threw with one hand before back handing Lee hard enough to knock him reeling. Before Lee could even begin to recover, Dai spun and dropped an axe kick into his back. Lee hit the ground hard, and a long rod of black metal suddenly appeared in Dai's hand.

He raised it over his head like a javelin and missed Lee by mere inches as Lee rolled just in time. Lee quickly sprang back and Dai whirled his staff into a ready position. "Lee, take em off!" Guy suddenly yelled. Lee turned and looked at him, "What? But you said..." Dai cut him off by hitting him in the back of the head with a full body horizontal swing of his staff. Lee rolled across the floor and only narrowly managed to dodge Dai's staff as it came sailing after him like a javelin.

Lee leapt upward and quickly yanked two white somethings out of his brown legwarmers. He spun and deflected the knife Dai threw at him with one of them before throwing them one after the other like shuriken. "Leg weights," Kakashi said, "Guy you are too much." Dai sprang backwards and they slammed into the ground as hard as he had earlier. Everyone stared as they realized how much weight Lee had been carrying.

Lee suddenly moved as fast as Wakai had during his fight with Gaara. Just as the Leaf and Sand teams were about to cheer, Dai caught Lee's invisibly fast punch without even looking. Lee's eyes widened and then Dai yanked him up and over his shoulder, mercilessly and repeatedly slamming him into the ground like a flail with one hand. He finally spun and threw Lee across the ring. Lee flipped midair and

managed to skid to avoid a bone breaking impact with the wall.

Dai waited patiently for his next opening and then Lee panted as he unwound the bandages around his hands. Then he shot forward in a move Guy recognized as the Primary Lotus. Suddenly there was a meaty smack as Dai intercepted Lee, catching him by the face and then slamming him into the ground. Dai leapt upward and used the weight of his fall to drive a rib cracking pile driver into Lee's torso. As he was walking away, Lee dragged himself back to his feet, his lungs hemorrhaging, "We're not done."

Dai turned half to face him, a slight smile on his face, "Then I hope you've got an ace up your sleeve, or you're just going to get hurt." "You have no idea," Lee snarled. Guy clasped his hands and started praying as Lee crossed his arms into a defensive X, "Third Gate! GATE OF LIFE!" Kakashi, Asuma and Kurenai all lunged forward against the rail in horror as Lee's whole body turned red and began to glow with chakra, "GUY YOU IDIOT! WHAT DID YOU DO?!" Kakashi bellowed as a tremendous wind came howling out of nowhere.

Lee seemed to finally have Dai's full attention as the chakra flowing around him turned green and gravity itself seemed to reverse as Lee roared, "FOURTH GATE! GATE OF \_PAIN!\_" Before even Dai could react Lee disappeared and finally managed to connect with a tremendous kick that knocked Dai twenty feet into the air. Dai hung in the air for a second as the speed of Lee's passing and the impact of his kick created a massive shockwave, "Well you've finally gotten interesting," he said with a grin.

He narrowly blocked the kick that struck seemingly out of thin air and then had his hands full as the air around him filled with shock waves from the strength and speed of Lee's blows. It was like he was trapped in a bubble of thunder as he and Lee exchanged a hurricane of incredibly powerful strikes too fast for a human eye to see. Suddenly Lee appeared, catching Dai's cloak, "FIFTH GATE! GATE OF CLOSING! HIDDEN LOTUS!"

He yanked Dai into a tremendous kick and simultaneous punch, launching Dai into the ground with such force the entire tower shook as the whole arena floor shattered under the force of the impact. Dai pushed himself up onto all fours, and went right back down as Lee hit him with the very last ounce of strength he had and the speed of a rocket. Dai twitched as Lee collapsed onto his back.

Then Dai grunted, "Well, that was...one hell of an ace." He started pushing himself upright but only managed to rise to his hands and knees, and was stunned to see Lee doing the same. He wasn't nearly as stunned as the Leaf Jonin though, who knew what opening even one of the Chakra Gates entailed, let alone five. Dai's eyes widened as Lee grunted, "I will, not, lose!"

He suddenly sprang forward on the last ounce of strength in his good leg and head butted Dai in the face before falling flat. Dai fell onto his side, unconscious, and Lee dragged himself forward with his good arm. He hauled himself on top of Dai and put him in a headlock. He shakily raised his left hand, which had shattered under the force of the pile driver he had used on Dai earlier, "I win!" he called weakly before passing out.

Everyone stared in shock and then someone started clapping slowly,

"Bravo!" Hattori Hanzo called from the door, Suigetsu and Haku poking their heads out from behind him as the dust settled. He strolled over as Gecko recovered from his shock and declared, "The winner is, Rock Lee!"

Hattori examined Dai and Lee closely, his eyes glowing behind his mask before he straightened up, "\*\*\*MEEEDIIICS!\*" he bellowed at the door. Half a dozen medics skidded and ran in with stretchers. Hattori pointed to Lee, "This genin needs medical treatment \_immediately.\_ When he wakes up, tell him he won." They gently lifted Lee onto a stretcher as Guy ran down to check on him.

Then everyone stared as Hattori picked up Dai by the back of his cloak with one hand and shook him, "Oi Dai, wake up." Dai stirred and then looked around, seeming to forget his blindfold, "What?" Hattori picked him up to eye level, "You lost that's what." Dai hung his head, "Sorry Hattori sensei. He surprised me." Hattori sighed and unceremoniously dropped him, "Well there's nothing to do about it now. You'll just have to do better next time." Dai scrambled to his feet and saluted, "Yes Hattori sensei."

Hattori pointed to the balcony, "Now get back up there with your team." Dai nodded, "Yes sensei." He turned and effortlessly sprang back up to the balcony, earning stares and dropped jaws of shock from everyone who didn't know him. Hattori looked up at Lord Hokage, "I apologize for my tardiness Lord Hokage, I only received word of these preliminaries an hour ago. I hope you don't mind if I sit in? I'd like to see how my genin fare, even if they don't make it to the final tournament."

Lord Hokage shook his head, "Not at all. Of course you may watch." Hattori smiled, "Thank you Lord Hokage. Come on Haku, Suigetsu. Let's get to our seats so the show can continue!" Haku caught his shoulder, "Hattori, I'd like to go check on Lee. He's a friend." Hattori looked at her and then nodded, "Of course. While you're in there, find out what that was he was using. I want to look into it. Anything strong enough to make Dai rely on his reserve seal to even remain conscious merits looking into." Haku nodded, "Right."

As Haku headed out Naruto nodded, "So that's how he did it." Everyone else looked at him, "What?" Naruto looked at them, "How Dai was able to get back up after that fight. He's got a reserve seal; he's got chakra stored somewhere on him that he can access if he gets tired or knocked out. If he runs out before he can access it though, he can still be knocked out like normal. That's how Lee was able to knock him out."

Then he frowned, "And wasn't that the girl from the bridge that was working with Zabuza?" Before anyone could answer Gecko was announcing the next match, "Next match, Shikamaru Nara against Kin Tsuchi." Shikamaru groaned, "Whaaat? I gotta fight a girl?"

==Shikamaru's "Chivalry" and the Sound of Bells==

Shikamaru was still very displeased as he stood across from Kin and Gecko declared the fight beginning. Kin sprang back and landed in a ready position. Shikamaru just raised an eyebrow at her and stood there. The stillness lasted for several minutes and then Kin got angry, "Well?! Are you going to do anything?"

Shikamaru shrugged, "I don't hit girls." Kin's jaw dropped as snickers escaped several of the rain genin. A fistful of needles appeared in Kin's hand, "Fine then, makes my job that much easier!" She threw her needles in a small storm and Shikamaru casually leapt out of the way, landing in the same bored pose he had been in an instant before. Kin growled and threw another fistful of needles, which Shikamaru dodged again. Then suddenly he staggered with a gasp of pain as the horrid raucous sound of a dozen massive bells clanging suddenly sounded in his head.

Kin smiled viciously, "Sounds pretty terrible doesn't it?" Shikamaru looked at her and found his balance so hopelessly shot that he could barely move as Kin threw another handful of needles right on point. Shikamaru grunted as one of the needles stuck in his leg, most of them caught in his thickly padded jacket. Shikamaru growled, "So that's your trick huh?" He made a hand sign irritably, "Shadow possession jutsu!" His shadow suddenly shot out from under him towards Kin.

Kin didn't know what it was, but she knew she didn't want it catching her. Shikamaru's shadow proceeded to chase her around the arena floor and then suddenly Kin felt something catch her feet and looked down. Shikamaru had laid a second shadow as a trap and chased her right into it. She found her entire body paralyzed as Shikamaru's jutsu took effect.

Shikamaru scratched his nose, Kin scratched her nose. Shikamaru scratched his head, Kin scratched hers. He walked towards her, she walked towards him. Shikamaru turned around, Kin turned around. Shikamaru made another hand sign without looking, "Shadow bind!" Suddenly Kin was slammed into the ground and tied up by the somehow suddenly solid shadows. Shikamaru proceeded to sit on top of her. Kin squirmed and shrieked indignantly, "What are you doing?!" Shikamaru didn't respond, he just pulled a bottle and a rag from his belt pouch and poured a bit of the contents of the bottle onto the rag.

He proceeded to stick the rag over Kin's nose and she immediately held her breath. Then Shikamaru gave her a squeeze in an inappropriate place with his shadows and she instinctively sucked in a breath to shriek at him, only to remember too late the chloroform in front of her nose. Thirty seconds later she stopped squirming and went limp. Shikamaru pulled the cloth from in front of her nose and tucked it back into his pouch before resting his chin in one hand and declaring in a bored voice, "I win."

Gecko blinked and then nodded and raised a hand, "The winner is Shikamaru Nara."

==Paper Paper Everywhere And A Cyclone In A Snit==

The next match had Gaara, Kankuro and their instructor Sasori trying to hide behind Naruto and all the Rain Genin trying to hide behind Dai and the second instructor. Everyone else looked at them in confusion as the screen blazed, "Temari Shiroyihei vs Kita Kamihito." Temari walked down the stairs to the arena floor and cast a cool gaze out the corner of her eye at the gorgeous young woman matching her stride and mirroring her gaze precisely.

Sakura looked at Gaara, Kankuro and Sasori, "Why are you guys hiding behind Naruto?" Gaara looked up at her from where he was crouched,

"Because Dad's not here and Naruto's the only other person I've ever seen throw down with Temari on a level playing field." Kankuro nodded, "Trust me, it's way safer back here." Sakura looked at Sasori, "Aren't you supposed to be a Jonin?" "I am a Jonin," Sasori replied, "So I'm smart enough to know when to duck and cover. Like right now."

There was a sudden explosion of wind that knocked everyone in the stands to the wall except Naruto, Dai, Hattori and the one other Rain instructor who had raised a wall of storm clouds around herself and the Rain genin behind her. Even Lord Hokage was flipped along with his chair. Naruto had to dig in to avoid being blown back as he reached out and caught Hinata. Kankuro looked at Sakura as she picked herself up, "Told ya."

Down in the ring Temari swung her massive fan again and unleashed another cyclone. Kita dissolved into a flurry of paper that flew around within the whirlwind before reforming, her arms crossed with an amused expression like she was trying not to crack up. Temari snarled, her eyes widening in rage. She tucked her fan back through her sash and started flashing her hands through an activation sequence and had to dodge as a flurry of white shuriken came flying at her. She managed to finish the activation sequence, but then the white shuriken exploded midair.

Temari was thrown backwards and knocked skidding across the floor. She managed to drag herself partially upright and throw herself out of the way as another volley of white shuriken came flying at her. Temari repeated her activation sequence as she ran, dodging white shuriken every step. She finally got close and yelled, "Let's see you laugh this off! Dragon Flame Jutsu!" She suddenly blew out a massive torrent of flames.

The minute it touched Kita, she exploded. Temari was knocked across the ring again and Kita seemed to materialize out of thin air, a hand covering her mouth to conceal a large smile as her eyes danced with mirth and her shoulders shook with laughter. Then Temari disappeared in a puff of smoke and Kita's expression changed to wary in an instant. Temari appeared behind her an instant later with a massive boulder raised over her head and slammed it down on top of her.

Temari leaned against the boulder with a massive grin, "Ha! Paper weight!" Then she suddenly cried out in pain as several something's skated along the surface of the boulder, slicing her arm on the way past. Temari leapt back and suddenly the boulder exploded apart around a forest of massive white spikes. Temari clutched the stinging cuts on her arm as the white spikes whirled and folded, suddenly turning into Kita. Kita smiled smugly from on top of the rubble, "Nice try, but I'm afraid it's my turn now."

She suddenly turned solid white and there was a sound of paper rustling as her form bulged and changed. In seconds Temari was staring at a massive origami dragon. Kita struck and somehow her paper snout left a crater in the arena floor as Temari leapt out of the way. Suddenly Kita's tail whipped around and slammed into Temari. Temari caught the tail and then screamed in pain as the paper forming the tail suddenly frayed out like a thousand blades and whirled, shredding her palms and forcing her to turn loose. Then Kita struck with her fangs and slammed Temari into the ground, rock hard paper

fangs sinking into her painfully.

Temari cried out in pain as the majority of Kita's paper dragon body reformed into her usual body, her arm remaining the dragon's head and pinning Temari to the ground. Kita made a hand sign with a sadistic grin as she suddenly detached the massive dragon head and reformed her arm as she leapt back. Temari reached up and shakily grabbed one of the dragon's horns in a bloody hand, then symbols flowed across every sheet of paper in the massive origami monstrosity. Temari's eyes widened with horror as she recognized the markings of a huge mass of paper bombs. An instant later, they went off. Gaara, Kankuro, Sasori and Naruto were on the verge of leaping down into the ring to get to her as there wasn't even a peep from the massive cloud of smoke and ash where Temari had been.

Kita smiled smugly and then a very scorched looking Temari leapt out of the ground in an explosion of dirt behind her. She raised one hand to her lips in a hand sign, "Waterfall Jutsu!" Kita's expression was suddenly one of horror as a massive torrent of water exploded from Temari's lips.

In seconds Kita's paper form was utterly soaked and limp. Temari strode forward shakily, gritting her teeth against the pain as Kita desperately released her paper body transformation with a pained gasp to keep her body from collapsing into an irreparable soggy mess. Temari's grin stretched from ear to ear as she caught Kita's shoulder, clenched a bloody fist, and threw a full body punch into her jaw that sent her flying across the ring. Temari shook her hand, "Yeah, that'll, that'll teach ya," she panted, obviously still in a great deal of pain.

Gecko looked at Kita, who despite not being very hurt was soundly unconscious and raised a hand, "The winner is Temari Shiroihebi!" Temari wobbled on her feet slightly as she straightened up full of well earned pride, blood leaking from numerous cuts and burns, "Damn, damn right..." She said with a swing of her fist that tried to be triumphant but instead simply threw her balance off and sent her crashing to the ground.

#### 14. Chapter 12:The Preliminaries Turn Brutal

=Chapter 12-Furious Rivalries-The Preliminaries Turn Brutal=

==Furious Family Feud! Sakura vs Ino==

After Temari and Kita were carried out, Sasori, Gaara, Kankuro, and a Naruto clone rushing to follow and check on Temari, the next set of names flashed onto the screen. The Leaf teams drew in a concerted breath as they saw the match: Sakura Haruno vs Ino Yamanaka. Sakura and Ino exchanged a hard look and those who knew them knew when they saw that look that this was going to be possibly the most vicious match up yet.

Sakura planted one foot on the rail and leapt down into the arena, spinning and landing effortlessly, crossing her arms and settling into a casual but ready stance as she waited for Ino to take the stairs. Ino reached the starting point and Gecko raised his hand, "Seventh match, Sakura Haruno vs Ino Yamanaka. Ready?" He sprang

back, "Begin!"

There was immediately an explosion of smoke around Ino. Ino reappeared behind Sakura with a kunai to her throat, "Gotcha." Sakura smiled as she too disappeared in a puff of smoke, the real Sakura appearing behind Ino and spinning a beautiful kick towards her head that would have sent Ino flying. Ino managed to duck and roll forward. Sakura twisted her leg and brought it down in a tremendous stomp that sent a forest of stone spikes rocketing forward into the slowly clearing smoke Ino was hiding in. Ino shrieked in pain and Sakura smiled grimly. Then Ino rolled out of the smoke unharmed with her hands in position to fire her mind transfer jutsu.

Sakura leapt out of the way cart wheeling and formed an earthen wall with her chakra as she landed. As Ino rushed out of the smoke Sakura hurled a kunai at her. Ino narrowly dodged, but a line of blood still opened up on her cheek as the blade grazed her. Ino rolled and dodged the additional kunai Sakura had thrown after the first one. Then she was sent flying as Sakura slammed the ground with a chakra infused punch and made the ground ripple like a tidal wave.

Ino suddenly reappeared behind her again and Sakura only narrowly managed to detect her in time to spin and drive an uppercut into her jaw. Ino disappeared in a puff of smoke, another shadow clone Sakura thought. She tried to turn and then found that she couldn't. The ground seemed to be swallowing her feet. Sakura quickly made a hand sign and bobbed and weaved in place so that Ino couldn't lock onto her while she broke the genjutsu.

Ino snarled across the ring as Sakura broke her genjutsu. Sakura quickly leapt into the air and then raised an earthen dome around herself on landing. Ino tensed, whatever was coming out of there, she thought, it wasn't going to be good. Suddenly the earthen dome exploded and a dozen Sakura's charged her. Ino's eyes widened and she flashed her hands through an activation sign, activating her Mind Cloud jutsu just as the first Sakura was about to reach her.

The Sakura's all suddenly stopped and looked around puzzled and then wary. In seconds they were fighting each other. Ino smiled and sat back to watch the show as she prepared her Mind Transfer jutsu for when the real Sakura was the only one left standing. Suddenly she heard Sakura yell, "Earth Style!"

Before Ino knew what had happened, she was buried up to her neck, a very smug Sakura crouching in front of her grinning like a Cheshire Cat, "Headhunter Jutsu." Ino suddenly appeared behind her and swung with a kunai, "Now you're mine!" Sakura exploded in a puff of smoke as the kunai hit her. Then Ino was once again buried up to her neck, facing her clone, "WHAT?!" Sakura suddenly punched both Ino's from underground, and the second one yowled in pain as the first one dissolved in a puff of smoke.

Sakura exploded out of the ground and yanked Ino from the ground by her ponytail before spinning her around by it and slinging her into the wall. Ino crashed into the wall and Sakura without a moment's hesitation leapt and dealt a knockout punch even as Ino was falling off the wall. Ino's form went totally limp as Sakura sprang back with a smile forming as Ino failed to turn out to be another shadow clone.

Sakura landed panting as Gecko walked over to check on Ino. Gecko rose after a moment with a grim look on his face, "The winner is, Sakura Haruno!" Sakura grinned from ear to ear and jumped ten feet in the air with delight. Then the medics rushed in and rushed back out, carrying Ino as fast as they could, working on her even as they went. Sakura's heart skipped a beat, she hadn't hit Ino that hard had she? She ran after the medics to check on Ino, whose face she saw upon drawing closer to be a bloody mess as Sasuke manifested a clone and sent it after her, Shikamaru and Choji running along behind him with Asuma hot on their heels.

\_Please don't be dead, please don't be dead, don't you dare be dead Ino!\_ Sakura thought in a panic as she raced for the door.

Suddenly a foot slammed into her face and hit hard enough to knock her a full flip. Sakura rolled to her feet and wiped the blood from her busted lip as Ino released the genjutsu. Sakura's eyes widened as she saw that Ino was completely unharmed and she realized that she had been in a genjutsu for the last few minutes. Ino grinned at her as she set her foot down, "And now, I know what you're going to do. You're all out of tricks!"

Sakura smiled, "Oh, I might have one left." She started flashing her hands through an activation sequence and Ino raised her hands to use her Mind Transfer jutsu. Then Sakura's last shadow clone leapt out of the ground and smacked Ino in the head from behind. Ino staggered and then Sakura finished the activation sequence as her shadow clone caught Ino in a complex wrestling hold with a grip like iron, "Fire style! Fireball Jutsu!" Ino gasped in horror and then the flames rocketed toward her.

"I surrender!" She shrieked. The flames petered out mere inches from her as Sakura smiled, "Good."

== The Horror Of The Hyugas! Hinata's Secret Weapon Unleashed! ==

As Sakura and Sasuke shared a victory kiss which made Ino utterly incandescent with jealousy, Gecko announced the next match, "Hinata Hyuga vs Neji Hyuga!" Hinata and Naruto flinched in unison as Neji cast a cold gaze towards Hinata. Naruto hugged Hinata tightly before she followed Neji down to the floor.

They set up with each other and Neji looked at Hinata, "I never thought we would have to fight Hinata." "Nor I brother," Hinata replied meekly. Up in the stands Ino blinked, "What did she just call him?! Those two are siblings?!" "Cousins," Sakura replied, "Same clan, first cousins. They're about like we are, as close to siblings as it gets without actually being siblings." "Oh," Ino replied, "Ok."

Ino looked at Naruto, "So who's going to win? You know Hinata better than anybody." Naruto crossed his arms grimly and looked at the floor his face taut with tension as Sasuke replied, "Neji. He's way out of Hinata's league and they use the same fighting style. This is a horrible mismatch." Naruto suddenly growled, and everyone close by looked at him and saw he was utterly livid, his hair standing on end as his tail thrashed madly and he viciously glared a hole in Neji's back.

They turned back to the ring and saw that Hinata was standing with

her head down and her fists clenched. "What did he say that set Naruto off like that?" Ino asked as she backed up a step. "I don't know," Sakura replied quietly, shooting a glance at Naruto out the corner of her eye, "I've never seen him like this." "Apparently Hinata was kicked out of the line of succession because they thought she was too weak," Kakashi told them in a hushed voice.

Suddenly Hinata raised her head and Neji actually backed up a half step from the hard light in her eyes, "You're right Neji. I was thrown out because my father thought my kindness made me weak." She raised her fingers to her lips in a hand sign, "Byakugan!" She settled into her stance, her expression so cold and fierce that everyone who could see it wondered if that was still Hinata down on the floor, "And you just got in line to be the first person I beat on my way to proving him wrong."

Those in the stands couldn't see Neji's expression as he activated his Byakugan, but Kurenai was tense, "I've never seen Hinata glare at somebody like that, have you Shino?" "Only when Temari mentioned having had a crush on Naruto," Shino replied. "It looks like Neji just stumbled across one of the things Hinata cares about most," Kakashi said half to himself, "And those things are the most dangerous to threaten."

Gecko raised his hand from between the two cousins and leapt back out of their way, "Begin!" Hinata launched forward like an arrow from a bowstring, a flat handed palm ready to strike. Neji sprang back and struck towards her arm with two fingers, actually connecting but not seeming to do any damage. They continued to exchange fast and furious hand strikes, Neji constantly blocking Hinata's strikes, but with none of his own strikes seeming to have any effect despite many of them landing.

"Hinata must be out of her mind with rage going toe to toe with Neji like that," Sasuke muttered to Sakura, trying to keep his voice down to prevent Naruto from hearing, "His hand speed is way out of her class!" Sakura nodded, "And that's about all that matters with Gentle Fist." "What do you mean?" Ino asked, "I've never trained for taijutsu with either of them, what's Gentle Fist?" "It's the Hyuga Clan's special fighting style," Naruto replied without looking, still watching the match intently.

"They load their strikes with chakra," he continued, "It doesn't matter how hard they connect. As long as they can get a hand even close to you, they can shoot their chakra into your network. It doesn't normally leave a mark, but it does do extensive internal damage to their target. It's like their opponents skin and bone isn't there, you're just striking right at the sensitive tissues and delicate internal organs. That's why it's an assassins favorite, doesn't leave a mark and looks identical to organ failure unless you take the organ in question out and look at it. Since they don't have to hit hard, the most important factors are chakra control and hand speed, and Neji's hands are some of the fastest in the Hidden Leaf Village."

"But," he added with a grin, "Hinata's been learning some, unorthodox tricks." Everyone looked at him, "What?" Naruto just pointed and they saw Neji and Hinata frozen, their hands jammed under each other's guards. There was a cough and suddenly Neji staggered back, Hinata just smiled coldly and settled back into her fighting stance,

completely unaffected by the blow she had undoubtedly taken.

Neji clutched his stomach and stared, "How?" Hinata smiled, "I told you Neji, just because I am kind, does not mean I am weak." Neji's face contorted with pain as he stumbled slightly, "How did you block that attack? It was a direct hit to your heart! You should barely be able to stand!" Hinata only slid further into her combat position, "I'll tell you after I win, provided you can keep a secret." Neji snarled, "You're not going to win."

Hinata launched forward without a word and Neji suddenly disappeared inside a huge spinning spherical shield of chakra so strong it was actually visible like a whirling blue wall, "Eight Trigrams Revolving Heaven!" Hinata smiled and slammed her elbow into the shield. An instant later it had disappeared, drained away into her body like water into a sponge. Neji stared and danced away from her in horror, "That's impossible!"

Hinata didn't reply, she just grinned as she launched forward to deliver a finishing strike. Neji's hands flashed up and caught her hand as he slammed the palm of his hand into her forearm. Hinata stopped, a stunned look on her face and Kakashi winced, "Oh, that's what he was doing." Everyone except Naruto looked at him as Hinata staggered back, "What?" "He's been striking her chakra points, the valves within the chakra system that regulate the flow of chakra throughout the body," Kakashi explained as Neji lunged forward and struck Hinata's other arm repeatedly with lightning speed, "If they're blocked by say, a hit from a Gentle Fist user, then the parts of the body don't get any more chakra and are completely useless until the chakra point opens back up."

Neji finally relented panting as Hinata's arm fell to her side, "And it looks like Neji just hit every chakra point in both Hinata's arms," Kakashi continued grimly, "so her arms are going to be completely useless now." Neji settled into his stance, "Give up Hinata, you're beaten!" Hinata hung her head and started shaking. Neji raised an eyebrow in disgust, "All that big talk and now you start crying? You really are weak." Then Hinata raised her head and he saw she was laughing.

Neji had just enough time to realize something was very, very wrong before chakra blazed to life around Hinata's hands, "\*\*\*WHAT?!\*\*" Neji exclaimed along with every Jonin present. Suddenly the chakra began to spin in Hinata's hands so that it formed into discs and she sprang forward, her arms somehow perfectly functional as she swung and jabbed viciously at a desperately dodging Neji.

Neji finally managed to disengage and as he sprang back he flashed his hands through an activation sequence, "Hiding in Mist Jutsu!" He blew out a stream of mist that suddenly obscured the whole field. Hinata froze as her entire line of sight was suddenly filled with Neji's chakra. "Hiding in Mist Jutsu," Kakashi said half admiringly, "One of the only things that can truly blind the Byakugan. Hinata was doing so well I almost regret teaching Neji that technique. By the way," he looked at Naruto, "How did Hinata withstand those attacks? I'm certain you had something to do with it."

Naruto smiled proudly, "I did indeed. It's a little something we've been working on ever since her dad threw her out of the succession. With some help from my grandfather, we finally got it right." Down on

the floor Neji stared in horror and confusion as he saw his own chakra flowing in lines over Hinata's, "What?" Hinata smiled and suddenly leapt above the mist, "Live wire!" Neji had just enough time to realize he was doomed before the rope of lightning chakra Hinata swung into the mist electrocuted him.

He collapsed as the mist cleared, his clothes smoking slightly and all of him singed. Hinata's triumphant smile was tinged with a hint of sadness as Gecko announced her the winner and the stands erupted with applause, "I'm sorry Neji, I couldn't lose to you here," she told him still form quietly. She followed the medics that came to move him out and Naruto finished his explanation to Kakashi in a whisper.

When he was finished, Kakashi stared at him, "You do realize you just broke the style of one of the Hidden Leaf Village's oldest and noblest clans right? Along with possibly over half the ninjutsu in existence? I'm going to have to tell Lord Hokage about it you know." Naruto smiled, "Go ahead. We knew she'd probably only get the full shock value from it once anyway. If you could ask him to keep it a secret though we'd be grateful. Hinata's still got a long way to go to get her birthright back." Kakashi nodded, "Yes, but I don't know what Lord Hokage will say." Naruto nodded, "Boss Hokage's cool, I'm sure he'll understand."

Kakashi scratched his head, "Yes, but I'm not sure he'll allow her to keep using it. That's an extremely powerful weapon, especially here." Naruto frowned, "He might not, but Neji was the one we wanted to test it on, so I guess she'll just have to rely on her other abilities from here on if that's the case." Kakashi nodded and disappeared in a puff of smoke. He reappeared next to Lord Hokage and whispered what Naruto had told him in the Hokage's ear.

Lord Hokage snapped around to look at him like he was a poisonous snake, then he looked at Naruto across the arena with a stunned and mildly horrified expression. Naruto waved at him with a smile as Gecko announced the next match.

==The Grand Poobah of Grumps vs The Chief of Chill==

"Next match! Chirru Bukimina vs Sasuke Uchiha!" Sasuke leapt down into the ring and got a good look at his opponent as Chirru stepped over the rail, unfolding legs that had to be nearly as long as Sasuke was tall and then dropping down to the ground. Sasuke stared, Chirru had to be at least eight feet tall! He was an absolute string bean though, his limbs were long and lanky like he was four arms short of being a giant spider. His hair was probably a foot long and stood up all over his head like it was charged with static electricity and even with a mask covering the lower half of his face Sasuke could tell he was smiling amiably.

Chirru strode across the arena to the starting point, covering the distance in two steps. He crouched down and was at eye level with Sasuke. He was all folded up as he waved, "Yo dude, did I hear em right? You're an Uchiha? Totally radical dude. I've heard like a lot about you guys." Sasuke raised an eyebrow as his Sharingan went active. "Begin!" Gecko announced as he sprang back. Before Sasuke could move Chirru raised a hand, "Whoa dude," He held up a sign, "Check it out man."

Sasuke looked at the sign and saw it had a crudely drawn smiley face with a smug smile on it. "It's like a little smiley face dude," Chirru continued. He suddenly spun the sign so fast it blurred and when it stopped, Sasuke saw it had suddenly become a picture of himself looking at Chirru, "And you're like whoa, what is this guy doing showing me pictures and stuff, but it's like totally cool because it's like, all part of my plan you know?"

Sasuke raised an eyebrow in confusion, continuing to look at the picture as Chirru went on, "Cause like by now, you're like, trapped in my genjutsu and when you look at me, you're gonna like totally freak out..." Sasuke tore his eyes away from the picture and looked at Chirru only to recoil in horror and disgust as he saw what had been behind Chirru's mask: A horrible slavering insect mouth with inch long fanged mandible dripping with toxic looking foam.

"But it's like totally cool ya know?" Chirru gurgled as he tucked the sign away and suddenly rose. Sasuke looked and backed away in horror as he saw that Chirru's lower body had become the back half of a horse sized spider. Chirru gestured vaguely with his hands, "You're all like whoaaa dude's a spider man! That's like so not cool! But it's cool, it's cool, cuz like, you're not gonna live long enough to have to deal with it, so like you got no cause to worry."

Sasuke's whole body felt like lead as Chirru opened his eyes...all eight of them. Chirru kept talking, "And it's like even better because you'll be totally dead before anyone else. You're not gonna have to see all your friends die like really horrible deaths, so ya know, no like mental scarring or whatever. You can just die now and like not even have to worry about it."

Chirru suddenly sprang forward and pinned Sasuke under his massive spider body. He scratched his chin and pointed up at the balcony, "Oh hey, who's that little cutie with the pink hair? Is she like your girlfriend or something?" "YOU LEAVE HER ALONE!" Sasuke bellowed only for Chirru to spit some kind of white goop over Sasuke's mouth so that he couldn't talk before saying, "Dude, when we burn the Leaf Village to the ground, I am gonna do like, so many uncool things with her, but it's like not even gonna matter, cause she's gonna like be dead afterwards, so no biggy."

Sasuke struggled furiously as Chirru looked over at someone Sasuke couldn't see, "Oh we're starting already? Okay cool." He suddenly raised up slightly and covered Sasuke in more of the white goo which Sasuke could now tell to be webbing. Chirru lifted Sasuke and Sasuke saw the Rain nin locked in combat with the Leaf Sand and Sound nin, Lord Hokage dead in his chair and the Rain nin rapidly gaining the upper hand. Chirru suddenly threw Sasuke down and leapt at Sakura, slamming her into the ground and covering her in webbing like he had Sasuke.

What felt like hour after horrible hour passed as Sasuke saw his friends tortured in front of him, the village burning to the ground, its people lying dead and dying in streets, Naruto finally snapping and unleashing the Nine Tailed Fox only for it to be somehow beaten and killed...the horrors went on and on. Finally the horrors stopped and Sasuke was left clutching Sakura's body to his chest, tears pouring down his face as carrion crows picked at his friends corpses around him.

"Sakura...Sakura please, open your eyes, speak to me!" Sasuke begged, his throat catching and his voice shaking with sobs, "Don't leave me! Please! Don't...don't leave me..." His voice, harsh from what felt like days of screaming, finally abandoned him as he dissolved into helpless heartbroken sobs.

"Poor Sasuke..." a sinister voice said coldly from behind him. Sasuke's eyes snapped open, "No, not him...he can't be here!" Sasuke looked over his shoulder and saw a black haired figure sitting atop the still forms of Sasuke's friends. Sasuke set Sakura down as Itachi smiled at him, "Still too weak. Always too weak to save anyone." "Shut up..." Sasuke snarled as he rose shakily to his feet, "Shut up..." "Nooo Sakura!" Itachi moaned mockingly, "No please don't leave me! Don't leave me like mommy and daddy!"

Sasuke's eyes burned with rage as Itachi laughed. "I'LL KILL YOU!" He roared as he lunged at Itachi only for Itachi to dissolve into crows. As the crows flapped around him, tearing into him viciously with claws and beaks too numerous to block or escape, Sasuke swung madly, lashing out violently in every direction. A hand suddenly touched his shoulder and he whirled, jamming his kunai into the chest of the person behind him.

Sakura's eyes were wide as they bored into his very soul and blood started leaking from her mouth, "Sasu...ke...?" She collapsed into his arms as the life faded from her eyes. Sasuke stared at her in horror, then it all finally became too much for him, "SAKURAAAAAAAAAA!" He bellowed at the sky before his head collapsed against hers and the tears flowed freely. Suddenly Sakura's voice cut through the horror and pain, not into his ears, directly into his mind, "\_Sasuke behind you!\_" Sasuke rolled instinctively and a blade sliced through the air next to him. He sprang back and the blade slammed into the ground where he had been crouched.

He looked and saw Chirru, no longer a spider, just his lean lanky self hefting a huge halberd. Sasuke's eyes burned with rage, "\_You..."\_ he said in the most murderous tone that he had ever used. He sprang at Chirru, and even though Chirru back pedaled and wielded his halberd expertly trying to fend Sasuke off, it was like he was telegraphing worse than any opponent Sasuke had ever had. He was lightning quick, but he seemed to be moving in slow motion to Sasuke as he sprang and jumped and ducked and dodged around the massive pole arm, too intent on his target to notice the world flickering around him.

Blood roared in his ears as he finally got inside Chirru's guard and jumped, slamming an uppercut into the lanky ninja's jaw with everything he had. Chirru staggered backwards, his halberd falling from his grasp as he collapsed. Sasuke didn't give him the slightest opportunity to get back up, so focused on exacting his revenge that he didn't even notice the horrid apocalypse disappearing around him in an instant like it had never existed.

He sat on Chirru's chest and hit him in the face with everything he had. Then he hit him again, and again, and again and again, not even caring as blood flew and skin tore beneath his knuckles. He didn't hear Gecko declare the match over, didn't hear him yell at Sasuke to cut it out, didn't hear anything until Gecko caught him by the back of the shirt and hurled him off Chirru. Sasuke rolled to his feet, still not quite back to his senses and tensing to spring even as

Gecko drew a sword and got ready to stop him if he tried to get at Chirru again while the other Rain nin and even several of the Leaf nin leapt into the ring to back Gecko up if he needed it.

Suddenly three strong sets of hands had him and his vision was full of pink as Sakura yelled in his ear, "SASUKE STOP IT!" Sasuke finally snapped out of the killing rage he had been in and his eyes and mind cleared as medics rushed to work on Chirru. He blinked as the red faded from his vision, "Sakura?" She leaned back a little so she could look him in the eye, "Yes, it's okay, I'm right here. I'm okay." She gave a little yelp of surprise as Sasuke suddenly yanked his arms free of Kakashi and Naruto's grip to wrap Sakura in a hug so tight that a voice in the back of her mind worried her armor would crumple.

"Thank god," Sasuke whispered shakily, "Thank god." He nearly collapsed with sheer relief and Sakura had to help him back to the sidelines. He was so focused on her that he didn't notice the stares, or Kakashi and Naruto following him closely and watching him like hawks, or Gecko conferring quietly with Lord Hokage and Hattori Hanzo.

\_I'm sure you're burning with questions about Sasuke's fight, so I'm going to answer those first. Yes, Sasuke totally snapped, whatever control he had went completely out the window, and yes he would have beaten Chirru to death if Gecko hadn't pulled him off.\_

\_I couldn't go into detail about what Sasuke saw because it would probably have doubled the length of this chapter and I'd have had to kick the rating up to whatever's above R. Let's leave it at horrible enough that Sasuke's going to be in a very fragile state of mind for quite some time because of it.\_

\_No, Chirru can't really turn into a giant spider thingy. It was just part of the genjutsu to make Sasuke see all his worst fears realized. Yes that does mean Sasuke is afraid of spiders.\_

\_Someone out there is probably thinking that making him see Itachi is cliché and obvious. I think it's perfectly reasonable for Itachi showing up to mock him to be the icing on the cake, and then tricking Sasuke into "killing Sakura" to be the last straw to make Sasuke snap.\_

\_How he heard Sakura through the genjutsu is a surprise for later. Sorry, but trust me it's worth the wait.\_

\_On the Hinata vs Neji fight, yes, Hinata and Naruto have found a way to render Gentle Fist completely useless along with as Kakashi said possibly half the ninjutsu in existence. I can't tell you what it is yet, but you'll find out what it is by the final tournament.\_

\_Yes Hinata has Lightning Release and Live Wire Jutsu, while not the signature technique I came up with for her, is a component of it. You'll probably see it during the final tournament.\_

\_Yes it does rankle extremely sorely with Hinata that she was kicked out for being "weak" and yes she is quite determined to prove those who doubted her wrong and take back her rightful place within her clan.\_

\_Yes Naruto is extremely protective of Hinata and he is much more level headed than in canon, so yes, this really is the first time Sakura's ever seen him steaming mad.\_

\_Finally is the first fight, Sakura vs Ino. Yes Ino is skilled enough to lay genjutsu within genjutsu, she's been trained specially for that and has had a lot of training time with Kurenai and other genjutsu specialists.\_

\_Yes Sakura has learned, among others, the Shadow Army Jutsu from Naruto and the Fireball Jutsu from Sasuke, in addition to honing a considerable talent for Earth Release and her not too inconsiderable physical strength.\_

\_I'm sure the thought has probably crossed your mind by now that nearly everybody in these preliminaries has to be at least Jonin level. In canon yes they would be. However in Vermillion Thunder, Jonin level is a fair deal more than it is in canon, as the candidates we've seen thus far are actually only at about chunin level instead of jonin, some variations in there about whether they'd be at "new chunin" or "experienced chunin" but all are at Vermillion Thunder's chunin levels. In Vermillion Thunder \_\_to be a Jonin you must have been on at least 5 S-Rank missions, at least three of which have to have been successful and at least one of which you led, plus have at least 20 A-Ranks under your belt, at least 4 led by you. So while ability does play into it, it's much more about experience.\_

## 15. Chapter 13: The End of the Preliminaries

=Chapter 13-The End of the Preliminaries! Blazing Passion and Smoldering Aftermath=

==Boom vs Bugs==

After the arena floor had been cleared and Sasuke and Chirru taken to the infirmary, Sakura and three Naruto clones going with Sasuke while Kakashi stayed behind to confer with Lord Hokage, Gecko strode back onto the floor, "Alright, I think we're ready for the next match." He turned to the screen as a fresh set of names flickered up, "Shino Aburame against Zaku Abumi."

Shino and Zaku walked down to the arena floor and Gecko looked at them both, "I'll remind you both that fatal force is forbidden." Zaku snorted derisively and Shino thought, \_you're in no position to be complaining with that arm in a sling, unless...\_ Shino smiled behind his high collar. Gecko stepped back, "Begin."

"If you fight me here," Shino warned, "You'll never fight again. Quit now while you can." Zaku snorted and settled into a stance, "I've still got one arm, and that's more than enough for you!" He sprang forward and snapped out a strike at the side of Shino's head. Shino blocked him effortlessly, "You can't beat me with just one arm." "Shut up!" Zaku snapped, "Air Slicer!" He opened his palm towards Shino's head and hit Shino in the face with a wind blast.

The wind blast sent Shino rolling across the floor and kicked up a huge cloud of dust. Shino was very still for a minute and Zaku laughed, "Come on, get up! I'm not done yet!" Suddenly Shino lurched.

He lurched partially upright, then a little more upright, then he straightened up in a manner that was utterly disturbing to watch. As Zaku started to worry, he heard a sudden loud chittering noise. Suddenly Zaku realized what it was as he saw Shino's dark coat seem to writhe and black specks moving on his skin, "Bugs..."

Then he realized the chittering was coming from behind him as well, and he spun to see a writhing black carpet of beetles nearly ten feet wide behind him. Then Shino had him by the back of the neck and slammed his face into the floor with his whole body weight behind him. Before Zaku could move Shino caught his wrist and dislocated his shoulder. Zaku screamed in pain and blacked out. Shino stood and looked at Gecko, "I'd say I've won." Gecko nodded, "The winner is, Shino Aburame."

Shino turned and casually walked off, the beetles crawling along behind him like baby ducks following their mother.

==Choji's Full Throttle Determination! Battle Cry Barbeque!==

After Zaku had been carried out Gecko announced the next match, "Choji Akimichi vs Dosu Kinuta!" Asuma clapped Choji on the shoulder right before he headed down, "Choji, barbeque's on me if you make it to the final tournament. All you can eat." Choji looked at him wide eyed, "You mean it? Promise?" Asuma smiled, "Of course I mean it! Now go show em who's boss!" "YESSIR!" Choji bellowed happily, actually running down to the ring.

Dosu raised his one uncovered eyebrow as Choji bounced in place with his hands up like a boxer, clearly extremely eager for the match to begin. Gecko raised an eyebrow at him too and then nodded, "Alright then. Begin!" He quickly sprang back out of the way and Choji immediately snapped forward, his fist somehow expanding to the size of his torso. Dosu didn't even have time to blink before Choji had smacked him across the ring.

Dosu hit the wall hard, but looked more irritated than hurt. Then Choji sprang forward and pummeled him with massive fists that inflated as he swung. Choji pounded Dosu savagely for several minutes before springing back to catch his breath. Dosu pulled himself out of the Dosu-shaped hole in the wall Choji had made. He growled, clearly furious, "Alright fatso, you asked for it." "WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?!" Choji bellowed.

Dosu sprang forward without answering and struck at Choji. Choji blocked with another suddenly supersized hand, only to bellow in pain and spring back clutching his arm. Choji snarled, "You're gonna pay for that." He made a one handed hand sign and suddenly inflated like a balloon. He pulled his arms and legs in with a roar of pain and then his head.

Chakra suddenly exploded out from his hands, feet and head and he surged forward, "Human Boulder Jutsu!" Dosu hauled back and slammed the Choji boulder as it rocketed towards him. Choji's whole body rippled for a second and he suddenly flew backward. Choji slammed into the wall and immediately deflated, slumping to the ground. He pushed himself up coughing and his eyes widened as he saw Dosu jump and bring his fist down on the floor like a flying pile driver. The following sonic blast rattled Choji's whole body and turned the tile Dosu had struck to powder.

Choji didn't see that though, he had passed out almost immediately. Dosu rolled his shoulders and neck and there was a sound like metal clanking, "I win." Shikamaru and Ino stared, "How could Choji lose like that? He's as tough as an ox!" Ino protested. Shikamaru held his chin in his hand, "Whatever that shockwave was, it was sonic. It would've had the same effect no matter how big or strong Choji was." "So how is anyone going to beat him?" Shikamaru shrugged, "I dunno, you would probably have to restrain him to keep him from making sound blasts, but I hope I don't have to be the one to figure it out."

As the medics carried Choji out and Dosu went back to the stands Gecko looked up at the stands, "Will the final two contestants please step forward?"

==The Final Battle! The End Of The Preliminaries!==

Tenten watched the white haired girl in gray warily. She looked completely at ease as she rested her dark red umbrella on her shoulder. Gecko looked at them both and then nodded as he sprang back, "Final match, Sokushi Misutsuyu vs Tenten Shimura. Begin!" The girl moved almost too fast to see and smacked Tenten with her umbrella so hard it knocked Tenten sailing and spinning backwards as she jumped and narrowly blocked it. She threw a handful of shuriken with her free hand and Sokushi snapped her umbrella open immediately, using it like a shield and effortlessly deflecting the shuriken.

Sokushi folded her umbrella partially back and snapped it back full as Tenten launched a kunai at her. Sokushi charged forward, her umbrella fully extended. Tenten skipped to the side and drew a kunai, ready to lunge and stab Sokushi as she charged past. Just as Sokushi drew level with her and Tenten went to strike, a second umbrella popped open in her face. Tenten instinctively recoiled in surprise and then the umbrellas snapped closed and Sokushi swung one at her horizontally. Tenten sprang back and narrowly dodged the umbrella as it whooshed past her nose, only missing it by a hairs breadth.

Then she clutched her stomach gasping in pain as the point of Sokushi's second umbrella slammed her mid-riff and drove the wind out of her. Before Tenten could catch her breath, Sokushi slammed both umbrellas into either side of head and then kneed her in the face. Tenten's head snapped up and Sokushi's foot snapped out and right into her nose. Sokushi set her foot down as Tenten skidded backwards and reversed her grip on her umbrellas, holding them like a pair of knives and tensing to spring and resume her assault.

Tenten flipped back to her feet, rubbing blood out of her nose as she dropped a smoke bomb. Sokushi smiled, "Come out come out wherever you aaare..." There was a series of \_poof\_s and Sokushi ducked behind her umbrella as a hailstorm of blades came rocketing out of the smoke. They flew sporadically, with about a five second delay between volleys, only striking when Sokushi peeked out from behind her wall of umbrella, almost like Tenten was throwing one handed. As the smoke started to clear, the knives finally stopped flying and Sokushi poked her head out from behind her umbrellas.

Naruto lunged against the rail for a closer look as a familiar voice asked, "Did she stop?" "GAMAKICHI?!" Naruto exclaimed. "Is that Naruto?!" Gamakichi exclaimed in surprise, "Hey Naruto! How ya

doing?" "Doing good!" Naruto replied and then the conversation cut off abruptly as there was a shiiing from the final vestiges of smoke. Suddenly a figure in steel samurai armor that was covered in seals erupted out of the smoke, a katana drawn and ready to strike.

Sokushi swore and crossed her umbrellas, narrowly blocking the blade. Tenten struck again like lightning, again and again raining hammering blows down on Sokushi as Sokushi furiously worked to match her sword work with her twin umbrellas, which were apparently made out of some kind of armor mesh as they withstood Tenten's blade as well as a sword. Sokushi was still completely on the defensive though as Tenten drove her backwards around the ring. Suddenly Sokushi sprang backwards, flicked one of her umbrellas into her other hand and made a one handed hand sign.

An instant later Gamakichi spewed a stream of oil and Sokushi a stream of fire, the two combining and creating a massive torrent of flames. "That's Toad Oil Fire Stream!" Naruto exclaimed in surprise. Tenten sprang back as the wave of burning oil flowed towards her and Kakashi looked at Naruto, "Isn't that a technique only known to people who've been to Mount Myoboku?" Naruto nodded as Tenten sheathed her sword, clung to a wall and started running along it, flashing her hands through an activation sequence as she went while Sokushi and Gamakichi tried to hit her with the seemingly endless stream of fire and oil.

Finally they ran out of oil and Tenten flipped to the ground, slamming her hand into the ground, "Ninja Art! Flame Devouring Seal!" There was a sudden suction from the spot where her hand had been as she sprang back. With a sound like a massive drain suddenly unclogging, the flames and oil were both sucked into the seal Tenten had made on the ground. Without missing a beat, Tenten slapped a seal carved into her armor and extracted a sickle and chain.

She held it upside down like a whip and spun the chain and its powerful weight until they blurred. She sprang forward and Sokushi narrowly dodged the weapons immense impact as the chain was revealed to be much longer than Tenten had been letting on. Before Tenten could land properly Sokushi sprang backwards and made a hand sign, "Ninja Art Needle Hell!" Naruto and Kakashi both surged against the rail in disbelief as Sokushi's hair suddenly moved of its own accord, almost like it was floating and a hailstorm of glistening white needles rained down on Tenten's armor.

The storm of needles slammed into Tenten's armor with such force that they actually penetrated and stuck in it, hitting so hard that they actually pushed Tenten back. When the barrage let up Tenten lowered her crossed arms and touched her shoulders, "My turn! Seal Release Shuriken Storm!" As she moved her hands away a storm of shuriken exploded out towards Sokushi who crossed her arms, "Needle Jizo!"

Her hair enveloped her like a cocoon just in time to save her from the massive barrage of blades. As Tenten's seals finally ran out of shuriken, Sokushi's hair receded and she made another handsign, "Ninja Art Hair Binding!" Tenten was suddenly enveloped in a mass of white hair that sprang from the hair needles embedded in her armor. Suddenly blades erupted through the hair and then the hair was sucked away into one of Tentens now spiked gauntlets. She drew her katana

and made a hand sign as she flipped up onto the wall, "Seal Release!"

Sokushi heard a sound like a waterfall and suddenly the seal Tenten had sucked all the burning oil into erupted, flooding the floor with flames. Sokushi back flipped away as the burning tide surged toward her, "Earth Release Mud Tide!" Her free hand touched the ground and the ground surged up and away from her like an earthen wave, quickly smothering the flames in dirt. The instant she landed Tenten was on her and the fierce swordplay between Tenten's katana and Sokushi's umbrellas resumed.

Suddenly Tenten's hand snapped out and Sokushi was wrapped in her own Hair Bind. It quickly fell away and Tenten took advantage of the momentary opening to strike, only for Gamakichi to blow a plume of fire in her face. She staggered back and Sokushi swung at her feet with her hair now woven into a whip. Tenten stumbled but skillfully back flipped away and back to her feet, her sword quickly coming back up into a ready position.

Sokushi flicked the cord of hair at Tenten and made a hand sign as she released the end, "Ninja Art Hairy Serpent!" The cord of hair suddenly split at the end taking the form of a snake midflight, only for Tenten to effortlessly slice through it with a short sword she whipped from a seal at her side and block one of Sokushi's umbrellas. Sokushi sprang back away from Tenten's stabbing short sword and Gamakichi covered her retreat with another burst of flame, forcing Tenten to retreat as well.

Gecko suddenly appeared between them as they prepared to re-engage, his sword and a kunai ready to stop either of them should they attempt to spring, "The match is a draw!" He declared. "I have conferred with Lord Hanzo and Lord Hokage, both contestants will advance to the final tournament!" Tenten and Sokushi lowered their weapons, both breathing heavily, "What?" Tenten asked.

Gecko sheathed his sword and pocketed his kunai, "Sasuke Uchiha has been deemed mentally unfit to continue and is being eliminated. Therefore, we have two openings instead of one. Congratulations, you have both proven yourselves worthy of participating in the final tournament. I declare this preliminary round completed." Tenten sheathed her sword and Sokushi rested one umbrella on her shoulder and the point of the other one on the ground as she smiled at a cheering, fist pumping Gamakichi.

Yes Zaku was faking his arm being injured hoping to catch his opponent off guard, but Shino kicked his butt anyway. Yes, Shino went much easier on him than in canon because Shino was able to beat him much more quickly than in canon.

Yes, Choji has far greater control of his Human Expansion Jutsu than in canon and is Squad 10's resident tank.

Yes, Dosu is a major league tank and all Choji's pummeling him did was tick him off.

Yes, Tenten is far more formidable than she was in canon. Someone's probably wondering how she got so good with a sword. The answer is that her maternal grandfather was a samurai, so she's been trained as a samurai as well as a shinobi, and while she is incredibly dangerous

and a sword master by average shinobi standards, she is still on the low end of average for one of Vermillion Thunder's samurai. She is also even more skilled in sealing jutsu than she was in canon.\_

\_For those of you who've guessed about Sokushi, keep it to yourselves and don't spoil it for the others who haven't.\_

\_Yes Kakashi knows about Mount Myoboku and the techniques taught there. He was trained by Minato who was a Toad Sage and had Jiraiya as a periodic guest instructor, so I think it perfectly natural for him to be familiar with knowledge of Mount Myoboku.\_

\_Yes Sasuke has been booted from the tournament. The reasoning will be explained in the next chapter assuming you didn't see enough reason in his fight. Yes Kakashi did agree to that and it was approved by the Hokage as well.\_

\_If you feel like there were a few less fights than there should've been, please check and make sure you saw all four chapters of the preliminaries. I posted 3 today and it looks like a lot of folks missed the second chapter. Here's the breakdown of them so you can check to see which one you might've missed if you did miss one:\_

\_\*\*Chapter 10:\*\*\_ The Preliminaries Begin: Naruto vs Kiba and Kankuro vs Teibo\_

\_\*\*Chapter 11:\*\*\_ The Preliminaries Heat Up: Gaara vs Wakai, Lee vs Dai, Shikamaru vs Kin, Temari vs Kita\_

\_\*\*Chapter 12:\*\*\_ The Preliminaries Turn Brutal: Sakura vs Ino, Hinata vs Neji, Sasuke vs Chirru\_

\_\*\*Chapter 13:\*\*\_ The End of the Preliminaries: Shino vs Zaku, Choji vs Dosu, Tenten vs Sokushi\_

## 16. Chapter 14: Aftermath

=Chapter 14-Aftermath=

==Ten Minutes After Lee's Fight==

Lee's eyes cracked open and he winced as he realized his hand and foot \_really\_ hurt. Then Guy wrapped him in a hug, "LEE YOU GLORIOUS IDIOT! WHAT POSSESSED YOU TO USE THAT? YOU COULD HAVE DIED! I'M SO HAPPY YOU'RE ALIVE!" he bawled. Lee blinked and suddenly a hand pushed Guy off of him, a medic leaning over him, "Back up Guy, I'm trying to operate. If you keep shaking him like that his bones will heal crooked and we'll have to re-break them if they're ever going to heal properly."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself Guy," the medic scolded him, "Teaching him a technique like the Eight Gates." "I know," Guy said, hanging his head. "Do not be sad Guy sensei," Lee told him with a weak smile, "I used it of my own free will. I knew the risks." "And you still won," said a woman who Lee couldn't see, "and against the strongest of the genin sent from Hidden Rain no less." "Fat lot of good it'll do him if I can't heal his bones properly," the medic grumbled. The medic went on, "Your bones are going to be very fragile

after this young man, absolutely no fighting for three months, and if you don't hold still a year!"

Lee immediately stopped trying to raise up and froze. "I'm afraid you probably won't make the final tournament," the medic continued, "They usually give a month off between the second exam and the third, but your bones won't be healed enough for you to fight in a month." "Surely Lord Hokage will not hold it against him," the woman protested, "Dai was trained by Lord Hanzo himself! His whole team was!"

"Lord Hanzo is training students now?!" Guy asked in horror. "Lord Hanzo II," the woman corrected him, "Hattori Hanzo, the man you met in the Land of Waves that recruited me to the Village Hidden in the Rain." "The Rinnegan user is the son of Hanzo of the Salamander?!" Guy asked in shock. "Yes," the woman replied a little irritably as though that were completely obvious, "Now if you will excuse me, I will go convey your concerns to Lord Hanzo. He values determination and hard work a great deal, so I'm sure he will advocate Lee's advancement."

Lee raised his head, "He will?!" Then his eyebrows rose as he saw it was the girl from the bridge, "You!" Haku smiled, "Yes Lee, I'm certain Lord Hanzo would promote you if you were a Rain genin, and I am certain he will advocate your advancement with Lord Hokage. Dai was his apprentice the way you are Guy's; defeating him is an extremely impressive feat, one that even I would have trouble with." She leaned forward and touched Lee's cheek with a smile, "So rest up, I'm sure everything will be fine."

As she walked away, a still blushing Lee looked at Guy, "Um Guy sensei, what just happened?" Guy blinked and then burst out laughing.

==An Hour Later==

Lords Hokage and Hanzo walked into the infirmary behind Gecko, Anko and Ibiki Morino, the remaining Jonin instructors and candidates filing in behind them. Those in bed sat up a little straighter if they could. Kiba was sitting up on his bed with Akamaru, not much worse for wear despite the pounding Naruto had given him. Wakai was still out cold and wrapped almost head to toe in bandages with both hands and both legs in casts. Lee had a cast on his left arm and leg. Temari's hands and one arm were wrapped in bandages and she had a gauze pad on one cheek. Kita was sitting up on her bed which was right next to Temari's where they had been chatting, getting along quite well now that they weren't fighting.

Neji was in the bed next to Lee, covered in mint green paste that made him look like he was at a spa, a fact that had earned him a fair deal of good natured teasing from Guy and Lee once they were certain he was okay. Sasuke and Chirru were at opposite ends of the ward, Chirru was still unconscious with his face completely covered in bandages. Sasuke was still pale and hadn't let go of Sakura's hand since his match, shaking every time his thoughts drifted to what he had seen. Zaku's yowl of pain when his shoulder had been forced back into socket had left him shaking for almost five minutes. Choji was still out cold from his fight with Dosu.

Lord Hokage cleared his throat, "I commend all those who have

advanced to the final round of the third stage of the Chunin Exams, and now I will begin the explanation of the final round. In the final round, each of you will put your battle skills on display, you'll demonstrate all the power and control you've achieved in your respective disciplines. Accordingly, the final battles will commence one month from now. This is to provide a suitable period of preparation, so that we can announce the results of the preliminary matches to each country's leaders, we must also have time to prepare and distribute the summons for the final selection, not to mention that you examinees are going to need time to prepare for something this important. Up until now you've fought not knowing anything about your opponents beforehand, that will no longer be the case. By now everyone here knows your techniques. So take advantage of this month to learn new techniques and develop new strategies. Using your old tired tricks is a sure way to lose in the finals, and be sure to remember to get some rest as well."

Then he smiled, "Now there is one final matter to attend to before we advance to the finals. In a calm orderly fashion, those of you who have advanced are each to take a slip of paper from the box Anko is holding." "Everyone just stay where you are," Anko instructed cheerfully, "I'll come to you." She went around the room to those who had advanced, and when she got to Sakura and Sasuke, Kakashi reached out and caught Sasuke's hand before it could get to the box. Sasuke and Sakura looked up at him in surprise, but he shot them a look that told them they would discuss it later and they immediately fell quiet.

When she finished handing them out, Morino looked at a clipboard, "Good, everyone has one. Now going from left to right, tell me the number that's written on your slip of paper." He pointed to Tenten who was closest. "Four," she declared. Morino pointed to Sokushi who declared that she had gotten five. Dosu had twelve. Gaara had seven, Kankuro two, and Temari ten. Naruto had one, Hinata had three and Sakura six. Lee got eight, Shikamaru nine and Shino eleven. Lord Hokage nodded, "Good. We will now explain how the final selection tournament will work." "Is that what the numbers were for?" Shikamaru asked, "Drawing lots?" Lord Hokage ignored him, "Ibiki you may now announce which ninja have been paired up." "Yessir," Morino replied, stepping forward and showing them all a strange diagram that all of them could tell after a minute to be a bracket, albeit a three branched one.

Shikamaru raised a hand, "Can I ask you a question?" "You may," Lord Hokage replied. "So if the final exams are a tournament, does that mean there'll only be one winner? Only one of us will become a Chunin?" Shikamaru asked. "Actually it's quite the contrary," Lord Hokage grinned, "There will be a number of judges for the final round, including myself, the Kazekage, Lord Hanzo and other shinobi leaders from various nations that will ultimately be assigning your missions to you. Through this tournament, the judges will be able to make a thorough evaluation of your abilities. They will then decide whether any or all of you possess the qualities required of a chunin. Even if someone loses the first round, they could still become a Chunin."

"So there's a chance everyone who competes in the final tournament could become a Chunin?" Temari asked. "Correct," Lord Hokage replied, "Conversely there is also a chance that none of you could become Chunin. The advantage of fighting more rounds in the tournament is

having more chances to display your talents in front of the judges who will decide your fate. Does that answer your question Shikamaru?" Shikamaru nodded, "Yes sir."

Lord Hokage nodded, "Then let us adjourn until next month." With that, the speech was done and the competitors and Jonin instructors went to their teams, Lord Hattori following along behind the second instructor from the Rain Village with Suigetsu and Haku behind him looking reluctant to be in the same room with him. Several sets of eyes followed him, curious to see what he was going to do. He walked down to Chirru's bed and looked at the medic, "How long will he be unconscious?"

The medic shrugged, "It's hard to tell with head wounds. It could be anywhere from minutes to days, his skull was fractured during his fight, we've been checking for brain damage. We haven't found anything yet, so he should be alright, but there's really no way to know when he'll wake up until he does." Hattori nodded, "Alert me at once when he wakes up. He's in for an ass chewing that'll make him wish we had let the Uchiha kid keep pummeling him."

The medic looked like he wanted to protest but then decided against it as Hattori turned to Wakai, and his mentor, "How is he Yori?" Yori's expression was grim, "He'll heal, but he won't be able to practice for at least six months, and he won't be fit to return to the field for at least a year and a half, if not two." Hattori lowered his head grimly, "I see. Has he woken up yet?" Yori shook his head, "No. He's still sleeping. The doctors say it's best to let him." Hattori nodded, "Then that's what we'll have to do."

He sighed, his expression inscrutable behind his mask, "Would you like to oversee two fresh genin, or place Teibo under my direction while Chirru and Wakai heal?" Yori and Teibo's heads snapped up, and then Yori looked back at Wakai, and then at Teibo who nodded, "It's okay Yori sensei. You need to be with Wakai. You're brothers, you've gotta look out for each other." Yori nodded, "I would like to request a leave of absence to deal with a family medical emergency." Hattori nodded crisply, "Granted."

He turned to Teibo, "Teibo, you are being assigned to Bofu's tutelage for the duration of this exam. You will henceforth function as a member of Squad Thirteen, and next time someone says they've poisoned you, \_Draw. It. Out. With. Your. Mushrooms. That. Is. What. They. Are. For!\_" Teibo snapped a salute, "Yessir!" Hattori turned to the second Jonin instructor, "Bofu, you've got a new student." The young dark haired woman nodded, "Okay."

He walked over to Kita, "Kit." Kita flinched and turned to him nervously, "Hi Big Bro." Hattori reached out and patted her on the shoulder, "Good job." Kita blinked in surprise as he turned to Sokushi and Dai who were sitting on the bed next to Kita's. His hand snapped out and flicked Dai in the forehead protector hard enough to rock his head back, "Blockhead. How many times do I have to tell you not to underestimate your opponents?" Dai hung his head, "Sorry Hattori sensei. I'll do better next time." "You'd better," Hattori growled, "or you'll be doing one handed inverted pushups until Yori gets tired." Dai flinched.

Hattori turned to Sokushi, "Sokushi," He extended a thumbs up, "BRILLIANT." Sokushi blinked and then gave a dazzling smile, "Thanks

Hattori sensei!" Hattori's thumbs up turned into a wagging finger, "Now no getting complacent. That Tenten girl's no slouch, and you might have to fight her again. There won't be any draws in the final tournament unless you both go until you pass out, and nobody's got time for that. The others here are tough too. You're going to have to be at the top of your game if you're going to beat them."

Sokushi kept smiling anyway, "You got it boss!" Hattori nodded, "Good. All of you enjoy your time here in the Leaf Village, but do not neglect your training. That goes double for you Sokushi. Kit, Dai, Teibo, make sure she's at the top of her game for the tournament."

Then he turned to the Shiroihebi siblings, "And you three each beat one of my genin. I look forward to seeing you fight in the finals." They all three bowed slightly, "Thank you Lord Hanzo." Hattori nodded and headed for the door, pausing as he drew level with the teams from the Leaf Village. He turned and pointed to every one of them in turn, except Team Asuma, "I know you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you," his finger landed on Sakura, "And I'm glad to see that healing took properly."

Sakura blinked and then nodded with a smile, "yes thank you, it's like the wound was never there." Hattori nodded, "I'm glad." Then he turned to Neji and Hinata, "You two are Hyuga's are you not?" They nodded, "We are." Hattori nodded, "Be proud of yourselves, you've done your clan proud today." They both bowed, "Thank you Lord Hanzo." Hattori turned to Lee and extended a hand, "Congratulations, not many can hold their own against Dai, let alone beat him." Lee's eyebrows rose and he shook the hand in slight awe, "Thank you."

Then Hattori turned to Sasuke, "Sasuke Uchiha, correct?" Sasuke nodded mutely. Hattori was silent for a moment, "I am sorry. If I had known Chirru was going to disobey orders and use that jutsu, I would never have let him fight. You should be proud of yourself, I've seen Jonin reduced to helpless lumps by that jutsu. To have been able to remain standing, not just remain standing, but fight and win while still shaking the jutsu off is a feat that any and every great Uchiha warrior would applaud you for. The ghosts of your clan are glowing with pride today."

Sasuke stared at him for a moment and then smiled slightly and nodded, not sure quite what to say. Hattori nodded and turned to Sakura and Naruto, "I am looking forward to seeing you two fight as well. I feel like I've seen your face somewhere before Mr. Uzumaki and although I can't place it, I have a feeling your fight is going to be quite the spectacle. You Miss Haruno I am also looking forward to seeing fight, I can't wait to see what all you can do when you're actually exerting yourself." They both bowed, "Thank you Lord Hanzo."

He turned to Shikamaru, Shino and Tenten, "Good job to you three as well. I look forward to seeing your full arsenals in the final tournament." They all bowed, "Thank you Lord Hanzo." Hattori nodded and turned, "And Dosu Kinuta," his eyes glowed behind his mask, "That's a most interesting arm you have there." Dosu put a hand over his arm, "Thank you Lord Hanzo, I'm quite proud of it." Hattori nodded, "I look forward to seeing it's full capabilities at the tournament, and if you could convey to the Master of Hidden Sound that I'm looking forward to seeing him too, I'd be grateful." Dosu's

eye widened in surprise, then he bowed, "Of course Lord Hanzo, I will be sure the message is conveyed." "Good," Hattori replied as he stepped past.

He turned and surveyed them all, "You should all be proud of yourselves and your students. They have all fought very well today. I look forward to seeing you again in one month's time, until then, I must be getting back to Hidden Rain. Good luck to all of you." He nodded, turned, and strode out, Haku and Suigetsu hot on his heels.

==A Few Moments Later==

Ibiki Morino erected a silence barrier around Lord Hokage, Kakashi, Sasuke and Sakura for privacy. Naruto assumed it was to explain to Sasuke why he had been booted out of the exam, and Sakura was only being allowed in on it because Sasuke would need her. Naruto turned his attention to Neji, who was quietly conferring with Hinata about what Hinata had told him after their fight.

Neji bowed his head solemnly, "I see. I am sorry I insulted you Lady Hinata." Hinata laid her hand over his, "It's alright Neji, you couldn't have known." She suddenly tapped his forehead protector, "And even if you had, you couldn't have done anything about it. I'm going to have to do something about that once I regain my position." Neji blinked, thought about getting mad at her for bringing up the cursed seal so casually, then he realized what she had said, "Do you really mean that Lady Hinata? You would, undo the seal?" Hinata nodded, "It's allowed much foolishness to bloom in our house. I will not let it continue to do so. I'll need some help though."

Neji bowed what little he could, "Whatever service I can provide will be yours." Hinata smiled, "Thank you Neji, you are actually one of the ones I want backing me up the most. Everyone thinks highly of you, and we will need a great deal of support to bully my father into this. With my status being what it is, I cannot rally that support alone." Neji nodded then looked up at Naruto before looking back at Hinata, "But what about your relationship with Naruto? You know your father only allows you two to continue seeing each other because you were kicked out of the line of succession. What if he forbids you from seeing him?"

Naruto opened his mouth to reply, but Hinata beat him to it, "Naruto is the son of the Fourth Hokage, the godson of one of the legendary Sannin, the host of the Nine Tailed Fox and an extremely formidable shinobi in his own right. Let Father try explaining to the clan how \_that's\_ not good enough for him. If anyone takes his judgment seriously after he is proven so wrong about his own daughter, they certainly will not after that." Neji blinked and stared, "Naruto is the son of the Fourth Hokage?" Naruto smiled and sighed with cheerful exasperation, "Why is everyone always so surprised by that? I paint his face on the monument all the time and I look just like him!"

Neji blinked and then thought about it before nodding, "You do."

Suddenly Kakashi stepped out of the silence bubble, "Naruto, we've got a mission."

\_Since someone out there is bound to be wondering, no Haku does not have a crush on Lee, although I did bat that around as a possibility before I decided she would be involved with Hattori instead. Lee does however definitely consider Haku attractive. Fret not, good, no, GREAT things are still on the horizon of romance for our bushy browed friend.\_

\_Yes, Hattori is a nice guy, but he's also a world class hard ass. He was Team Bofu (Kita, Sokushi and Dai)'s first Jonin instructor. He turned over their instruction to one of his best friends and former teammates Bofu when he was promoted. He does care about his team, and he knows they have tremendous potential, which is why he gets tremendously frustrated when they do stupid things because he knows they're better than that. This care is likewise extended to everyone in Hidden Rain, although his former teammates and students are by far the closest to his heart.\_

\_He ordered Chirru not to use the genjutsu he did because Hidden Rain is in the middle of arbitrating negotiations between their current allies and Hidden Mist, so psychologically breaking their genin could theoretically hurt their chances of the negotiations going well if they accidentally break someone important. The Kazekage for example would've been livid if one of the Sand Siblings had been on the receiving end of that jutsu.\_

\_He didn't scold Kita for losing because she is in fact his adoptive little sister, and because she gave it as much as she could without running undue risk of killing Temari, which would have put quite a strain on Hidden Rain's relationship with the Kazekage. Kita is actually roughly Temari's equal, but they were both holding back significantly. Why and what Temari was holding back is a surprise for the final tournament.\_

\_Yes Hattori \_\_\*\*does\*\*\_\_ know who the Master of Hidden Sound is, and no the Hidden Sound had not figured out yet that Hattori and Haku were the ones who busted Suigetsu out. Hattori admitting to it is almost a declaration of war.\_

\_Yes, if Hinata proves her father wrong about something as important as his own daughter, then it will massively undermine his credibility. If Neji has rallied support for her birthright being returned to her when she does it, Hiashi will be virtually powerless to stop it, shy of fighting Hinata to throw her out (a move which would make him tremendously unpopular, and would make her popularity skyrocket if she won). If he has it sprung on him who Naruto actually is after he tries to forbid Hinata from seeing Naruto on the grounds of him not being good enough, his credibility will be almost completely destroyed because everyone will want to know just exactly how he didn't realize his daughter was dating the son of the Fourth Hokage, the godson of a Sannin who is also the Jinchuriki of the Nine Tailed Fox. He is aware of that last one, but the other two have escaped his knowledge thus far. Yes the relationship between Hiashi and Hinata is probably going to stay rather strained for quite some time.\_

\_Yes Neji is very popular within the Hyuga clan due to his strength, intelligence and good manners. Yes Hinata is currently an outcast among the Hyuga clan. She hasn't been totally disowned or thrown out of the clan, but she's not far off. Hiashi only chaperones her and Naruto's dates and disapproves of their relationship on principle. If

he knew who Naruto was he'd be much more accepting, but he's too busy looking down his nose at Naruto and Hinata to realize what is so very blatantly obvious.\_

\_Yes Squad 7 does have another mission already. This is at the urging of Hattori Hanzo and Ibiki Morino, who have both vouched for Sasuke's need to rebuild his confidence in wake of that genjutsu utterly destroying it. Also, there will be a fifth member on this mission who will be quite crucial to the mission and who has known Naruto longer than just about anyone.\_

**\*\*End Volume 2.\*\***

**\*\*Volume 3 \*\*\_\*\*"Guess Who's Back!"\*\*\_\*\* will be along once my stories hit 3000 views. \*\***

**\*\*If you want to speed it along but don't want to reread, you are welcome to check out my other ongoing work \*\*\_\*\*Naruto: Fractured\*\*\_\*\*, which features even more AU-ness, adapted characters from Soul Eater, One Piece, Kill la Kill, and Overlord, and a few arcs from what is currently written there'll be a full blown crossover with Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood (it's not listed under crossovers though because it hasn't happened yet). If you like any of those shows, please go check it out. I know it sounds too cluttered to work properly but I think it does.\*\***

**\*\*You could also check out my one-shot \*\*\_\*\*"The New Kazekage"\*\*\_\*\* which if it gets enough views and support I will strongly consider turning into an ongoing work rather than a one-shot.\*\***

**\*\*And if you like Fairy Tail, \*\*\_\*\*"Fairy Tail: Oberon"\*\*\_\*\* just got its 8\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* chapter.\*\***

## 17. Intermission Promotionals!

**\*\*Intermission Promotionals\*\***

Well everybody, we've hit the end of Volume 2! The reception for Vermillion Thunder has been utterly outstanding and it's made my day every day for the last week or two. So now while we wait for that 3000 views mark, here's a little bit of extra promotional stuff to tide you over! We have previews of ongoing works, my one and only one-shot, and a possible future story that I might do after one of my current works wraps up. I'm also including a list of my favorite Naruto fics so you can go enjoy them too!

**\*\*==Preview 1: Naruto: Fractured==\*\***

\_Sasuke\_

Day 6 of the Graduation Exams: Obito. My team: Sakura and Shikamaru. Obito led us out to one of the training grounds, set up a timer and turned to us holding two bells. Obito grinned, "The test is simple, all you have to do is get these two bells away from me. That's all there is to it. If you can't get them by the time this timer goes off at noon, I'll tie you to a tree and eat my lunch in front of you." "Why are there only two?" Sakura asked. Obito grinned, "Because there are three of you. Someone's going without lunch because they won't be able to take a bell from me, and that person will fail."

Sakura and Shikamaru flinched, but I grinned, I knew that trick. Obito smiled, "You all seem raring and ready to go, so get ready. And..." We all settled into fighting stances and then... "Begin!" Sakura pounced, Shikamaru activated his Shadow Possession jutsu, and I watched. Obito didn't even bother with his Kamui, he just sprang out of the way and let Sakura get caught in Shikamaru's Shadow Possession. He kicked Sakura square in the keester and sent her and Shikamaru both flying. Sakura's transformation flickered, revealing for just an instant the stunning beauty she went to such lengths to hide as she landed and she and Shikamaru both looked very irritated.

Obito looked at me, "Aren't you going to try?" I shrugged, "That Kamui is hard to beat." Obito grinned, "Don't worry about it. That would be just mean. I won't use my Sharingan if you don't use yours." I grinned, "Sounds good." I Body Flickered and swiped at him with a burning fist. He backed up and Sakura almost tripped him. He hopped over her sweep and right into Shikamaru's Shadow Possession. Obito's face twitched a bit in confusion and surprise, I could almost hear him think, \_Did I just get beaten by three genin in less than five minutes?\_

Sakura smiled, plucked one of the bells from his belt and tossed it to me. Then she grabbed the other one and tossed it to Shikamaru who released the Shadow Possession as he caught it. Obito looked deeply humiliated as he hung his head and pressed the stop button on the timer, "Three minutes and fifty seven seconds. You all pass. Have a good day." He picked up his timer and walked off.

I looked at Sakura and Shikamaru, then I called after him, "Uncle Obito! You want some ice cream?" Obito looked over his shoulder, "I'm about to go home and eat a gallon of it." Then he walked off. I looked at Sakura and Shikamaru, "I feel kinda terrible now." Shikamaru shrugged, "Your plan worked perfectly though." I nodded, "It did." Obito froze, "Plan?!"

He spun, "You three planned that?! HOW?!" We all shrank a little, "Well since every teacher does the same test for everybody we were able to cook up strategies for everyone in our group to win." Obito opened his mouth with a stunned expression, closed it, opened it back, closed it again. His eye twitched, "Was Naruko in on this?" I grinned, "Yeah. It was her idea." Obito sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, "That explains a lot." He sighed again, "Ok. New test." We all flinched, "New test?"

Obito grinned evilly at us out the corner of his eye as he reset his timer, "Yeah. New test. You've got the bells, now you have to keep me from having them at the end of five minutes. Time starts now!" He Body Flickered, set the timer down and managed to launch all three of us in an instant. I felt my Sharingan go active and I was able to flip and skid a landing. I saw Obito toss the bells in his hand and then tie them back onto his belt before looking around with his own Sharingan to assess which of us was the biggest threat. I saw all that before I landed, then just as my feet were hitting the ground, Obito spun and disappeared.

An instant later his foot connected with the back of my head as he dropped a massive axe kick out of his teleport. Before I could even start to get up he jumped and was hurling Shikamaru across the

clearing an instant later. Shinrai's voice echoed through my mind, \_Sasuke, switch. Now. You don't stand a chance against his Kamui.\_ I nodded and made the sign, "Seal of the Four Gates Release!"

\_Shinrai\_

"West!" I declared as I took over, "Transform!" I turned back into my old self and sprang at Obito, my Mangekyo wrenching open and allowing me to phase the wind blades I whipped into existence around me into the Kamui's dimension as I whirled into Tunneling Fang, "Tasmanian Devil!" Obito tried to go intangible and learned the hard way that I can use the Kamui too as my wind blades tore into him.

Obito's shock at losing the advantage he'd held for decades wouldn't slow him down long, so I didn't let up. I spun midair and landed horizontal on a tree before Body Flickering back at him as I lashed out with half a dozen massive wind blades, "Wolverine!" Obito's quick on the uptake, I have to give him that. He teleported that time and dodged my attack. I teleported too as he reappeared above me and launched a massive Dragon Flame jutsu at me. I reappeared by Sakura and Shikamaru and dropped the prize next to them before Body Flickering at Obito as he teleported back to the ground.

I almost got him with my Cyclone Drill (a gauntlet of whirling wind blades) but then he sprang aside and blew out another burst of flames, forcing me to teleport again to avoid getting roasted. I teleported behind him and almost got him in the back, but he teleported before I could get him and I had to teleport again to avoid flying right into the flames I had been trying to avoid. This time I teleported to high above the clearing where my Sharingan picked out the faintest ripple in the air as Obito started to reappear.

I spun into my teleport and lashed out with a blast of wind chakra as I whirled out of my teleport above where Obito had just appeared. My wind blast was enough to send him rocketing towards the ground. I teleported again before gravity even took hold and reappeared on the ground, spinning two Rasengans into existence and forcing them into the shape I preferred to use it in, twin javelins. Then I waited for Obito to land. As I had predicted, he teleported behind me, just in time to catch both of my Rasen-Javelins upside the head. One was in the Kamui world and one wasn't, so only one connected with him, but even that was enough to send him flying.

Before he could stop rolling I threw one of my Rasen-Javelins after him. As they always do, the javelin splintered a foot or two from my hand and became a storm of chakra needles. Obito managed to teleport out of the way and my chakra needles dissipated just in time for him to reappear behind me mid-air and body slam me. I went intangible as I felt him connect and let him phase through me. He had adapted fast, but this was still the first time he'd ever been on the receiving end of that trick. I immediately punched him in the head, still intangible, so even though he went intangible as he landed in anticipation of my strike, I still connected because our intangibility phasing took us to the same dimension.

**\*\*==Preview 2-The New Kazekage==\*\***

"You can't be serious Temari!" Kankuro protested desperately, "He's a

samurai! Sent straight from the Lord of Wind! What do you think killing him will do?! The Lord of Wind will destroy us if his representative is killed!" Temari checked her hair in the mirror one more time and replied calmly, if a little irritably, "I'm not going to kill him Kankuro. I'm just going to persuade him to go the hell away, give Dad his job back, and never cross my path again if he wants to live." She lifted her fan and snapped it shut, the subtle clink of the razor sharp ends of the fans ribs that could slice as well as any knife giving away its true purpose as a weapon to those listening closely enough to hear it.

Kankuro pointed at it, "Well what're you taking that for?!" he demanded. He suddenly found it under his chin and Temari's glare was as cold and merciless as the steel points of her fan, "If he won't listen to sweet," A vicious glint entered her eye, "I'll just have to get sharp with him." Kankuro recoiled in horror, "Temari please!" A small voice suddenly spoke from the door, "Temari?" there was a tiny heart wrenching cough, "Kankur?" Temari's fan disappeared up her sleeve in an instant and she smiled warmly as she walked over to her baby brother and swept him up in a warm hug, "What is it Gaara?"

"I had a bad dream," Gaara said quietly, "I'm scared." Temari hugged him close, "Don't worry Gaara, it was just a dream. You want me to sing to you?" Gaara nodded and Temari held him a little tighter, "Okay, come on."

Half an hour later Temari stood in the doorway looking at her beloved brothers tiny form wrapped all in sheets, "Don't you see Kankuro?" she said quietly, "If I don't get Dad his job back we won't," she choked back a sob, "Gaara..." Kankuro laid a bear like hand on her shoulder, "Yeah. I know." He turned her around and bent down slightly to look her in the eye, "You come back safe alright? Don't do anything reckless. And dry up," he added with the wry grin she knew and loved, "Your make-up's gonna run." Temari wiped her eyes and smiled back at him, "Alright." Kankuro nodded, "Good, now get going. I'll watch him."

**\*\*==Preview 3- Fairy Tail: Oberon==\*\***

"Hey guys we're back!" Macao called as he, Wakaba, Oby and Cana strolled in. "And we brought friends!" Oby added. "So this is a guild," Ur said with a smile, "It seems like a nice place. Awfully hot though." "I feel fine," Gray declared only for everyone to point out that his clothes were once again missing. Oby flickered for a second and handed Gray his clothes with a laugh, "Come on guys, let's go meet- oh hi Master!" Makarov looked the ice wizards up and down and then looked at Oby, "You're not going to bring new recruits in after every mission are you?" Oby shook his head, "Nah, only when there's cute girls involved." Ultear blushed, "Aw!" Gray and Lyon shot him identical dirty looks as Cana snorted irritably and muttered, "Jerk." Oby just chuckled as Makarov stroked his chin, "Fair enough."

Ur raised an eyebrow, "Who said we're joining? We only came because Oby said you had somebody who could help with my leg." Makarov blinked, "Your leg?" Ur knelt and pulled up her pants leg to reveal the icy prosthetic and Makarov started, "Oh, of course! We'll go see Porlyusica right away. I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were injured." Ur smiled slightly, "I'm not injured any more. Oby was able to seal my leg up pretty good, but I'd still like to see about a prosthetic

that doesn't melt constantly in warm weather." Makarov nodded with a smile as he led her off towards the East Forest, "Of course, of course. I do hope you'll stay afterwards and enjoy a meal or two with us. I'd feel terrible sending you home after you just got here."

Ur smiled, "Well, maybe one night." Then she looked over her shoulder with a bright smile, "Behave you three, I'll be back soon!"

==Three Hours Later==

Ultear sat with Gray and Lyon as they waited for Ur to come out of surgery. Oby had brought them along when Makarov called him to assist Porlyusica in attaching Ur's new prosthetic. That had been an hour ago. Ultear shifted uneasily. She had so recently been on the verge of giving up on ever seeing her mother again because of these two, it felt so strange that she was to be their friend now.

"So, we, haven't really gotten to talk yet," Gray started. "Oby told us how he met you," Lyon said quietly. Ultear's heart skipped a beat, he had told them that he had met her on the verge of running away because of them?! "He said you were about to run away and never see Master Ur again because of us," Gray said as he looked towards the curtains that comprised the "operating room". "That you were afraid Master had been trying to replace you by taking us on," Lyon added as he looked away.

Ultear flinched and then Lyon went on, "I'll admit, for a while I thought that too when I found out about you. Then she took on Gray and I asked her, 'Why did you take him on? You don't need that punk, you've already got me to replace your daughter'." He snorted and rubbed the back of his head as Gray and Ultear stared at him, "I don't think I've ever seen Master Ur that angry. I know I've never gotten slapped that hard. She told me that was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard, that nothing could ever replace her daughter." He shot a glance at Ultear out the corner of his eye with a slight smile, "Now that I've met you, I see what she meant."

Ultear blinked and was immediately a vivid pink. Gray's head whipped around, "Oh sure! Go right ahead and use what we agreed would be an attempt to help her settle back in as an excuse to hit on her! Have some decency ya pervert!" "Says the guy in his underwear!" Lyon snapped back. Gray leapt up, "AH! When did that happen?!\_" "Keep your clothes on man!" Lyon barked as Ultear realized his own shirt was suddenly gone. "Why the hell did you take your shirt off?!" Gray exclaimed.

"So I can make muscly poses to impress Ultear," Lyon declared as he struck a pose with a grin. A moment later clothes went flying everywhere as they started wrestling and in less than a minute they were both in nothing but their underwear as Ultear suddenly asked, "Oh boys, can you help me find my top?" They both froze, looked at her, realized she was indeed topless, and had identical massive nosebleeds as Ultear laughed so hard she almost cried.

"WILL YOU KIDS SHUT UP?!" Porlyusica exclaimed as she erupted out from behind the curtains, "WE'RE TRYING TO DO SURGERY IN HERE! AND FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE PUT YOUR CLOTHES BACK ON!" Things were quiet after that, but the ice was broken, and by the time Ur woke up the next morning, they were all three crashed out in the living room in a

happy dogpile with Ultear on top as Oby snored in a nearby chair.

Ur smiled, "Is everyone at Fairy Tail like this?" she asked Makarov and Porlyusica quietly. Porlyusica nodded, "It's a wonderful place. I don't like humans, but Fairy Tail wizards, for all their rambunctious reckless noisy nonsense are still the best people I know." Makarov smiled, "Awâ€|" Porlyusica cast a sideways glare at him, "Don't get a swelled head ya old coot."

Makarov's head was suddenly the size of a beach ball, "I have no idea what you're talking about." Porlyusica snorted as Ur laughed and thought, \_Maybe this'll be a good place for the four of us after allâ€|\_

**\*\*==Possible Future Work: Consequences==\*\***

This one is a little bit different from all my others as I'll be starting at the Sasuke Retrieval Arc in this one. Instead of just a "fetch" order, Tsunade tells the retrieval squad that if Sasuke's been kidnapped, bring him back, but if he's gone rogue, then kill him. And the squad follows those orders, Naruto doesn't hold back at all, if he gets a shot he takes it, and he's fighting to kill. However, Sasuke still gets away. This is a tremendous black mark on the records of all involved and the Hidden Village's bureaucracy sidelines them for it. Everyone who went on the mission is now constantly passed over for good or important missions. Rock Lee gets his chops busted for going on a mission he wasn't supposed to and is in the same boat as the people who were actually assigned to the mission. Kakashi, Sakura and Naruto are all three taken off active duty because Sasuke was on their team and it's therefore "their fault" that Sasuke went rogue. Needless to say, they're all lining up for a chance to kill Sasuke so they can get their lives back.

When Naruto goes to train with Jiraiya, he's only able to \_because\_ he's been taken off active duty indefinitely, and he'll be learning lots of advanced tracking and combat techniques, spending the whole time training to hunt down and kill Sasuke.

Tsunade still takes on Sakura as an apprentice, but only unofficially. Officially Sakura's not supposed to be involved with shinobi work at all now beyond paperwork and stuff because she "let herself" get knocked out and didn't raise the alarm until Sasuke was already halfway to Hidden Sound. And everyone else who wasn't her friend mocks her for it. Her life has been hell ever since Sasuke left and she hates him for it. Even the teammates and instructors of the people on the Sasuke Retrieval Squad don't like her because they feel like the squad might have had a chance if they had been able to go after him sooner. Those who were actually on the squad know they only even survived because the Sand Siblings intervened, but nobody else wants to believe they were that badly out of their depth. Even the members of the Retrieval Team have started to blame her a little bit. Kakashi's upset with her too because in a way it \_was\_ her fault that Sasuke was able to get away. The only person who sympathizes is Naruto, the other person who shares the majority of the blame for what happened, so there's lots of room for SakuNaru to happen if the author feels like writing that.

Kakashi was nearly booted off the force all together because Sasuke was his student and the tribunal decided upon learning of it that Kakashi's last lecture to Sasuke to "grow up" and his lack of control

over his team letting Naruto and Sasuke go at it on that rooftop like that might have actually been something of a catalyst for Sasuke's defection. So Kakashi's not really trusted by the bureaucracy anymore and his record has gotten possibly the biggest black mark of all.

Everyone who was involved in Sasuke's defection, even tangentially, had their careers pretty much destroyed by it, and as a result they've had lots of time to think about it and train for the day when they get a chance to kill Sasuke to get their lives back.

And of course, they will get their chance.

==\*\*List of my favorite Naruto fics\*\*==

\_\*\*Avalanche\*\*\_ by Branch and Root (it's not on but it's fantastic, definitely worth googling)

\_\*\*Naruhina Chronicles\*\*\_ by MattWilson83 (a comic/doujinshi over on Deviantart, extremely awesome)

\_\*\*Chiaoscuro\*\*\_ by boomvroomshroom (Shikamaru fans rejoice!)

\_\*\*To See The Truth\*\*\_ by AlmineGoneWild (If you want something sweet)

\_\*\*Tsunade's Heir\*\*\_ by funkmasterjo (Naruto raised as the son of Tsunade with Shizune Nee-san and Pervy uncle Jiraiya. Pure. Awesome.)

\_\*\*True Potential\*\*\_ by DryBonesKing (Naruto + Hinata + Shikamaru under the instruction of Anko. Need I say more?)

\_\*\*A Family of Foxes and Snakes: Rewind!\*\*\_ by Dragon6 (Anko is Naruto's adoptive big sister and teaches him the fine arts of badassery and calling people on their bullshit)

\_\*\*Genius Sensei\*\*\_ by AlexDnD (Kakashi fans rejoice!)

\_\*\*The Somewhat Cracked Mind of Itachi Uchiha\*\*\_ by Kereea (Everyone but \_especially\_ fans of Itachi, Kisame, and comedy rejoice!)

\_\*\*A Growing Affection\*\*\_ by Xavon Wrentaile (Naruhina fans everywhere rejoice!)

==\*\*NEXT ON NARUTO: VERMILLION THUNDER!\*\*==

Naruto's fur stood on end as he sensed the malicious intent and rancid chakra coming up the stairs towards the hotel room he Sasuke and Sakura were sitting in, "Guys, I think we've got a problem." Sasuke and Sakura looked up, Sasuke's Sharingan activating in fear as his nerves, already badly frayed in wake of the genjutsu he had suffered, threatened to come completely unraveled. Then he leapt to his feet, his eyes wide as he stared through the wall like it wasn't there at the rancid chakra signature climbing the stairs, "We've gotta get out of here! \_\*\*NOW!\*\*\_" Before either Sakura or Naruto could ask why, Sasuke grabbed them both and leapt out the window, dragging them with him.

Sakura and Naruto landed badly and didn't have time to even fall down

as Sasuke ran off dragging them behind him, desperate to get away from whoever had been coming up the staircase. "What, Sasuke! What's going on?!" Sakura yelled, trying to gain purchase on the loose gravel of the street. "IT'S" Sasuke was cut off by a sudden explosion that blew a hole in the side of their hotel, two black clad figures erupting through the flames. As they landed Naruto picked out red clouds on their flapping black cloaks and burning red eyes in the sunken eye sockets of the one on the right. Naruto spun, grabbed Sasuke and Sakura and ran with them, easily running faster than Sasuke could as the Nine Tails lent him some chakra at the sight of the person that scared Sasuke more than anyone in the world: Itachi Uchiha.

## 18. Chapter 15-Training

=Chapter 15-Training=

==The Next Day==

Hinata stepped off the bridge into the central district and headed for the spot where her team usually met. Kurenai was there waiting, sitting cross legged on a stump as Hinata walked up. Kurenai smiled without opening her eyes, "Hello Hinata." "Hi Sensei, where are Shino and Kiba?" Kurenai smiled, "They're almost here." "What are we doing today?" Kurenai smiled, "A joint training session with Squad Ten. Asuma's former team is going to help you Shino and Shikamaru prepare for the final tournament."

Hinata blinked, "Asuma-sensei's former team?" Kurenai nodded, "They are extremely strong chunin. Only two of the three are here in the village, but their advice will be extremely valuable." Hinata nodded, "Ok, who is it?" Kurenai smiled, "You know Yumiko and her boyfriend Hatsume?" Hinata's eyebrows shot up behind her bangs, "Yumiko and Hatsume?!" "Is there a problem with that?" Kurenai asked. Hinata shook her head, "No, that's awesome! Yumiko's amazing! The way she fights is incredible! I've always wanted to learn from her but..." she bit her lip and Kurenai patted her shoulder, "It's okay Hinata. She sounded delighted when I asked her to teach you." Hinata brightened immediately, "She did?" Kurenai nodded, "Mhmm. She said she would love to."

==Half an Hour Later, The Hokage Monument Mesa==

Hinata looked around as Kiba fidgeted, "Are we early?" Kurenai sighed, "No, I think Squad 10's late." There was a sudden crash deep in the woods, followed by several more. A few moments later Squad 10 ran clear of the tree line as a huge fist narrowly missed crushing them. A figure with wings soared clear of the tree tops behind them and pulled the huge fist back, allowing it to shrink before spinning so fast he blurred. "That's Tunneling Fang!" Kiba yelled in shock as the mystery shinobi shot down at Squad 10.

The mystery shinobi missed and somehow landed and spun to his feet as he made a hand sign and blasted a huge gray cloud after the rapidly retreating Squad 10. Kurenai looked at Asuma as he ghosted up behind Squad 8, "Are you sure he isn't overdoing it?" Asuma laughed as the massive gray cloud suddenly exploded, narrowly avoiding incinerating Squad 10, "Don't worry, those three are tougher than they look." Yumiko appeared seemingly out of thin air next to him, "They should

really know better than to ask something like that."

Squad 10 suddenly froze and the shinobi they had been fighting strode clear of the ash, his hands folded neatly into a sign as Hinata saw his shadow stretching from him to the three members of Squad 10. He walked closer to them, "Now then, have we made it perfectly clear why I am qualified to give you three tips on combat?" He released the Shadow Paralysis Jutsu and Squad 10 slumped to the ground panting in exhaustion.

"Yeah," Shikamaru admitted, "You're good." "Told ya so!" Asuma called. Shikamaru groaned as Yumiko snickered. The mystery shinobi smiled as his wings collapsed back into a cloak, "Well good." Then he turned to Squad 8, "Hey there, Asuma said some pointers were needed for the Chunin Exam Finals?" Kiba pointed at him, "How do you know Tunneling Fang?! That's a secret Inuzuka technique!"

The mystery shinobi flipped his hood back to reveal hand sized bat like ears and glowing orange eyes, "I am Hatsumeï Fukusei. I make it my business to know." Kiba thought about arguing, but his animal senses picked up very clearly on the warning Hatsumeï's eyes were giving to leave it alone. He grinned, "Now then, who made it to the finals? All of you?" Asuma shook his head, "No, just Shikamaru, Hinata and Shino."

Hatsumeï scratched his head, "Well I think we all know who needs to teach Hinata. Yumiko?" Yumiko smiled and laid a hand on Hinata's shoulder, "Oh I think I might be able to teach her something, don't you Hinata?" Hinata blushed furiously and nodded, so excited to be learning from a kunoichi she idolized she didn't trust herself to speak. Yumiko looked at Shikamaru, "And Hats, you should probably teach Shikamaru, so sensei," She turned to Asuma, "Why don't you and Ms. Kurenai teach Shino while we work with Shikamaru and Hinata?"

Asuma grinned, "That sounds about right. Ok team, you heard the lady, you three are learning from Hatsumeï today. If you don't pay attention he has full permission to chase you around the Mesa until he gets tired." Ino Choji and Shikamaru looked at him in horror.

==A Few Minutes Later==

Hatsumeï looked at Squad 10, "So you three are the latest Ino-Shika-Cho team. That's quite a powerful formula." They all smiled and then he continued, "So I'm sure you three would've all made it if you'd been fighting as a team, but of course I could be wrong. The fact that any of you lost surprised me." He flicked an ear at a fly buzzing near his head, "So perhaps your competition was strong, or perhaps you three are weak and Shikamaru just got an easy opponent. Either way, let's see if we can't make you strong enough to pass next time." He grinned at the outraged expressions.

"Now then, let's start with Ino." They all three frowned in confusion, "But I thought you were here to teach Shikamaru!" Ino protested. Hatsumeï nodded, "I am, but I'm also proficient in Yamanaka and Akimichi clan jutsu, so I can teach you all a few tricks to make you stronger. Trust me, once Shikamaru learns the technique I'm teaching him you two are going to want a few new tricks. Now Ino, describe your fighting style."

Ino blinked, "Um okay, well I usually try to get my opponents to hold still long enough for my Mind Transfer Jutsu or bait them with genjutsu so that they exhaust themselves and show me all their tricks before I actually have to fight them." Hatsumei nodded, "So you're a typical genjutsu fighter." Ino flinched slightly, "I'm good at taijutsu too!" Hatsumei sighed, "I was afraid of that. You haven't even scratched the surface of the Yamanaka clan's mind jutsus." Ino flinched, "What?!"

Hatsumei folded his hands into a familiar looking hand sign that was aimed at her, "Mind link jutsu." Suddenly Ino heard his voice in her head, \_"This Ino allows you to learn jutsu from your friends and coordinate their attacks. If you get inside an enemy's head while they're unaware of it or distracted, then you can learn their jutsu as well although it is a risk. You can expand your arsenal tremendously this way."\_ Hatsumei released the jutsu and continued out loud, "You can also link the minds of your shadow clones so that they can fight with unparalleled coordination. And this," he added, "Is one I came up with."

He made a quick hand sign that looked a lot like the Mind Cloud Jutsu, then he clenched his hands, "Mind Disruptor!" He sprang forward and touched Ino's shoulder. Suddenly the whole world spun and tilted crazily, quickly growing fuzzy, Ino helpless to even cry out as her mind lost the ability to form cohesive thoughts. Hatsumei released the jutsu and Ino managed to catch herself before she fell flat on her face. She doubled over clutching her knees, panting as she tried to keep her balance, "What, what was that?"

"That," Hatsumei replied cheerfully, "Was Mind Cloud Jutsu loaded into a strike. The harder you punch, the more chakra goes into it and the stronger the jutsu is. A full body punch can easily make an opponent lose their breakfast even if you only graze them. The instant a single nerve is hit, they all go nuts. Imagine a team of well coordinated shadow clones using that jutsu. It's not quite Gentle Fist, but it's still very good. \_That's\_ how you deal with a physical fighter in close. Once you hit them with this, it doesn't matter how much physical strength they have, they'll hardly be able to keep their feet under them."

Ino grinned as she imagined surprising Sakura with it and Hatsumei turned to Choji, "now then, you're an Akimichi. Which means you have expansion jutsus, and I daresay you excel at delivering massive crushing blows, am I right?" Choji nodded, "Yeah." "Did you know that you can use it in conjunction with other jutsus?" Choji blinked, "Like what?" Hatsumei turned away and suddenly his chest swelled to quadruple its normal size as Hatsumei made a handsign, then \_FWOOMPH\_. He exhaled and flooded the forest with ash before turning back to Choji, "Simply expanding your lung capacity can greatly enhance any breath based jutsu. Also," His forearm and hand suddenly expanded, "Have you ever tried compacting all the mass in one of your expanded limbs into a small area?"

Choji blinked in surprise and then stared as the massive limb suddenly shrunk back to normal, his hand turning red in the process and glowing with chakra, "Watch this," Hatsumei told him with a grin. He sprang at a tree and put his fist straight through it. Then he expanded his hand and blew the tree apart. Hatsumei casually pushed the falling tree off course with his now enormous hand and avoided getting squashed as he turned back to them, "Hyper-compaction. It

makes your fist as hard as steel and even heavier than it would be at its expanded size. You can even blow apart softer materials like wood once you punch into them by releasing the compaction and expanding. Metal and stone you don't want to try it on, but once you increase your maximum expansion size enough you'll be able to use the hyper compaction technique with a fist the size of your normal body, and then it's like throwing boulders around. I call it the Battering Ram Jutsu."

Then Hatsume turned to Shikamaru, "You know Shadow Bind Jutsu right?" Shikamaru nodded, "Yeah." "Good then you'll be able to learn these without too much trouble."

==Meanwhile==

Yumiko stared at Hinata in shock, "That, that was, \_was that what I think it\_ \_was?!\_" Hinata nodded shyly, "Yes." Yumiko stared in shock and then nodded, "Ok, you have no need of new jutsu. If that's not enough to win I don't know what is." Hinata blushed, "You really think so?" Yumiko nodded, "I really think so. Even that girl from the Sand Village with the monster chakra should have a hard time beating that."

Hinata blinked, "Temari?" "Is that her name?" Yumiko asked, "Whoever she is, she's worse than that jinchuriki brother of hers by a long shot." Hinata blinked, "Naruto said she was the toughest of the three, but is she really that much stronger?" Yumiko nodded, "I've never seen chakra like theirs. There are so many different signatures that I can't tell if they've just got the most colorful lineage of anybody ever or if they've eaten half a dozen shinobi and assimilated their chakra. They all have multiple chakra signatures, but that girls is the most varied. The closest thing I've ever seen to it is that suit you're wearing, by the way that is really cool, you've got to show me how that works some time."

Hinata smiled, "Ok!" Yumiko sat down and pulled a water canteen from a seal in her field kit, taking a quick drink before offering it to Hinata. Hinata accepted it and drank as Yumiko continued, "They all have several chakra signatures in common, but the weird thing is that the girl's chakra has a different blend than the others. The other two have at least a few each, but they have a pretty similar mix. Hers though, one of the signatures most central for the other two is less prominent for her, almost like it was added on somehow. The Jinchuriki's Tailed Beast chakra is obvious and really distinct, but this is different. It's almost like they've all been cobbled together from other shinobi. The brothers have the same base, but the girl's so different I almost wonder if she was adopted."

Hinata frowned as she returned the water bottle, "What?" Yumiko took a drink and looked at the ground thoughtfully, "The chakra signatures are like different clan signatures, I see similar ones here in the Leaf Village all the time in the clans with kekkai genkai, but I've never seen so many different signatures in one person's chakra mix. It's like they've got multiple chakra affinities that I thought were only available to kekkai genkai users, and there are two more that I'm not sure I've ever seen before."

"One of them is almost like Miss Kurenai's chakra signature, but it's just a little bit off, and each of them have two variations of that signature, like they came from different people with the same kekkai

genkai. What's even weirder is that those signatures are some of the ones that don't look natural. Like the girl's got one that looks like a base signature she had when she was born, but then she's got three more that look like she got them after she was born, and one of those three is so hectic that at first I almost called it several different signatures. And it makes me wonder if she's adopted because her base signature is different from the one her brothers have."

Hinata blinked, "So, what does it mean?" Yumiko frowned thoughtfully, "At the very least it means she's adopted and has the most colorful lineage I've ever seen, at most, even those jutsu you showed me earlier might not be enough to stop her." Hinata went a little pale as she recalled Gaara, Kankuro and even their instructor Sasori's quickness to duck for cover when Temari entered the ring.

==Meanwhile==

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Sakura and Naruto landed badly and didn't have time to even fall down as Sasuke ran off dragging them behind him, desperate to get away from whoever had been coming up the staircase. "What, Sasuke! What's going on?!" Sakura yelled, trying to gain purchase on the loose gravel of the street. "IT'S" Sasuke was cut off by a sudden explosion that blew a hole in the side of their hotel, two black clad figures erupting through the flames. As they landed Naruto picked out red clouds on their flapping black cloaks and burning red eyes in the sunken eye sockets of the one on the right. Naruto spun, grabbed Sasuke and Sakura and ran with them, easily running faster than Sasuke could as the Nine Tails lent him some chakra at the sight of the person that scared Sasuke more than anyone in the world: Itachi Uchiha.

\_ Hatsume is from the Fukusei Clan, a small clan which only moved to Hidden Leaf a few generations ago. The Fukusei Clan is known for their ability to become gargantuan bats, and they can transform wholly or partially, allowing them extremely great versatility in combat. They can also use their chakra to harden cloth, such as Hatsume's cloak into makeshift wings when they need their hands.\_

\_ Yes, Temari is significantly more powerful than Gaara and could match him even in Tailed Beast mode. There is a reason for this, you will find out what it is during the Chunin Exams Final Tournament.\_

## 19. Chapter 15,5 Night Time in Hyuga Manor

\*\*AN: \*\*\_This chapter contains a lot of supplemental material at the

end explaining the world Vermillion Thunder is set in. While not a necessary read, it will help make a lot of things make sense now that the story will be branching out to other regions of the world.\_

=Chapter 15.5 - Night Time In Hyuga Manor=

==The Next Night==

Neji jerked awake as something bumped the ceiling of his room. He almost cried out in surprise as the black clad figure hanging from the ceiling with eyes so pale they almost glowed in the dark clapped a hand over his mouth and shushed him. Neji tried to make his pulse settle back to a normal rhythm as he recognized Hinata. She lifted her hand and jerked her head towards the door. She crouched on the ceiling and crawled out, silent as a spider. Neji quickly tied his robe tightly and did a handstand, pushing his feet to the ceiling where he clung with his chakra before crawling after Hinata, the almost silent crackle of his chakra on the ceiling sounding like thunder compared to Hinata's silent passing even though it would've been undetectable under normal circumstances.

He followed her down the hallway, curious about what she could possibly want at such a late hour. Hinata slithered through what Neji had always thought to be a solid panel in the wall and dropped silently to the ground once she was in, motioning silently for Neji to follow. Neji slipped in behind her and she slid the panel closed. "We can talk quietly now," she whispered, "this is one of the Quiet Ways."

"What's this about?" Neji asked quietly. "We're going to crack open the deep vault and do something about that seal of yours," Hinata replied quietly, her eyes gleaming with excitement in the dark, "Come on, the others are waiting." She turned without waiting for Neji to respond and took off down the narrow passage her footsteps light as feather falls. Neji stared after her for a moment and then took off after her.

A few moments later they entered a small room with other narrow passages leading off of it. There were three more people waiting for them, two wearing Hidden Leaf forehead protectors, two with the Byakugan and all looking ready for combat. Neji raised an eyebrow, "Hanabi? Yumiko? What's going on? And who's this?" Yumiko Hyuga, a young chunin a year or two older than Neji from one of the branch families, smiled behind the black mask concealing the lower half of her face, "Didn't Hinata tell you? We're breaking the seals."

The man next to her bowed slightly and extended his hand, "Hatsumei Fukusei, a pleasure to meet you Neji. Yumiko speaks quite highly of you." Neji raised an eyebrow as he returned the bow and shook Hatsumei's hand, "Thank you, a pleasure to meet you as well, although I have to wonder why Hinata and Yumiko would permit you such knowledge of Hyuga Manor." \_So this is the man Yumiko risked being kicked out of the clan for,\_ Neji thought curiously. Hatsumei smiled, "Neji the Fukusei have had an in depth map of Hyuga manor for decades. I probably know this building better than you do."

Neji's eyes widened, that was quite horrible news he thought. The Hyuga prided themselves on their secrecy and the impenetrability of Hyuga Manor, how could another clan have a \_map\_? He looked at

Hatsumei, "Why?" Yumiko answered, " The Fukusei are the ones responsible for making sure that none of the village's secrets are ever lost. It's even a tradition in their clan to steal a jutsu from another clan before they graduate from the Academy. I met Hats when he was spying on me to learn Gentle Fist."

Neji stared, "And you just kept it a secret that he had this knowledge?" Yumiko snorted with laughter, "Everyone knows they do it. Why do you think they have a reputation as thieves?" Hatsumei grinned, "I think most people would be more surprised if there \_weren't\_ any of us who knew Gentle Fist. Don't worry about it Neji, we keep secrets very well. The Hyuga Clan's secrets are safe with us." Neji started to protest, but Hinata raised a hand, "There will be time to discuss the morality of what the Fukusei do later, for now we must move quickly. They check the vault at dawn. We've got six hours at most, and we have to find and learn the unsealing before then."

"So let's go already!" Hanabi said quietly. Neji nodded tight lipped and they took off. Neji looked at Hatsumei as they fell in step behind Hinata Hanabi and Yumiko, "So why are you here? Are you here to steal our jutsu?" Hatsumei smiled, "I won't lie it's tempting, but no. I'm here for Yumiko. Now shush and keep your eyes open, we're almost to the end of the quiet way."

A moment later Hinata leapt and spun through the air, clinging flawlessly to the ceiling with agility and strength Neji would never have guessed she had. She scanned the hall and then motioned for them to follow. Hanabi and Yumiko slithered along the walls and then to the ceiling next to her, Neji and Hatsumei hot on their heels. They crept out of the side hallway and into the main hall, ironically one of the least patrolled areas in Hyuga Manor due to its clever construction.

Every plank in the hall was connected by a wire to a hammer that would hit a string of arguably the largest piano in the world should it's corresponding board be trodden upon and send the sound reverberating through the entire building. If people familiar with the flooring were to dance upon it they could make their own music to dance to with their footsteps. Now the five of them crawled silently along the ceiling, Neji still slightly in shock at the situation. Hinata and Yumiko he could understand, and even Hatsumei, but why was \_Hanabi\_ of all people in on this? With Hinata out of the line of succession Hanabi was next in line to take over the clan! What could she possibly have to gain from Hinata's goal to reclaim her birthright?

The next obstacle in their way was the collapsing stair case, a trick staircase that would noisily collapse into a slide if the hidden switch wasn't turned to engage the lock pin that would prevent its collapse. Neji couldn't help but cringe a little inside as one of the Hyuga's proudest booby traps was circumvented by simply crawling along the ceiling. Then Hinata paused and crawled over to the wall. She pointed to the ceiling and held her fingers an inch apart, then she pointed to the wall and made the same motion before pointing to the floor. She crawled down the wall and motioned for Hatsumei to go first. Hatsumei crawled past them grinning with manic delight, before standing on his toes on the lip of the collapsing stair and the floor beyond.

\_The blast needle wall,\_ Neji thought, \_How is he going to get past that?\_ Hatsumei made a handsign and held still for a moment, then he jerked his head for them to go. Yumiko smiled and flipped down to the floor next to him before casually running down the hallway, stepping on several of the pressure pads, but not setting off a single one. Hinata and Hanabi quickly followed, Neji reluctantly hot on their heels. He activated his Byakugan as he went and saw what was happening; Hatsumei was holding up the pressure pads with his chakra to keep them from activating, \_clever...\_ Neji thought.

Hatsumei released the chakra supports as Neji cleared the treacherous hallway and then suddenly transformed in a puff of smoke. A few moments later a small bat fluttered down the hallway to them. Hatsumei changed back as he landed next to them and observed the odd door behind them. It was intricately designed, and Neji knew with certainty that it was impossible to unlock quietly. Hinata surveyed the door quietly with her Byakugan and then Hatsumei tapped her on the shoulder and lifted one of the pressure plates from its mounting with a tangible shadow, \_The Nara clan's Shadow Strangle Technique?\_ Neji thought in surprise as Hatsumei made a motion to Hinata that translated clearly to "go under it".

Hinata nodded and transformed into a small silver fox, Yumiko and Hanabi quickly following suit, Hanabi becoming a brown mouse and Yumiko a black one. Neji flinched at the decision, he could only transform into one animal... he sighed internally and transformed... into a rabbit. He could tell from Yumiko's twitching whiskers and Hanabi's mousey grin that they had exactly the same reaction to his transformation Tenten, Guy and Lee had. He could already hear their voices in his head declaring him, \_"So CUTE!"\_ Tenten had insisted on hugging him, and that hadn't been so bad, but after that she had mercilessly teased him and not Tenten, Guy or even Lee could ever again keep a straight face if anyone mentioned the transformation technique around Neji.

Hatsumei hopped along past him in bat form as Hinata poked her head back out to see what was taking so long. Hatsumei didn't look at Neji, he just hopped along and into the hole and Neji shot him a silent look of thanks for not laughing. A few moments later the humiliating ordeal was over and they snuck out of a freshly moved tile on the other side of the door.

==Thirty Minutes Later==

Hinata knelt over the seal surrounding the entrance to the vault, which was in the bottom of a massive echo well that would relay any noise made all throughout the building. She rose and pointed to Neji and Yumiko, motioning for them to stay put and pointing to her forehead. Neji nodded, the seal would trigger their seals if they crossed it. Hinata edged across the seal's perimeter and suddenly Hatsumei's hand snapped out and yanked her back. She looked at him and surprise and he pointed to a section of the seal. She followed his gaze and her eyes widened as she realized it was also a perimeter alarm seal. She shot him an inquisitive look and he sat down before fishing out a bundle of scrolls.

He looked through them and selected one. He pulled it out and unfurled it, revealing an insanely complex seal. He pulled out a kunai and gently scratched his palm, a tiny bead of blood welling from the wound. He pressed his hand to the center of the seal and a

moment later he grinned before pointing to his eyes and then to the vault door. Hinata Hanabi and Neji all looked and saw Yumiko brazenly strolling up to the door, the seal failing to activate even as she started cracking the combination to open the door.

Before any of them could even ask what Hatsumei had done to the seal, Yumiko had the door open and was waving them in. It didn't take them long to find what they needed. There wasn't much in the vault. Hinata quickly pointed out the scroll and Yumiko activated her Byakugan, quickly transcribing the sealing technique inside onto a fresh scroll. She rolled it up and they all quickly ran back out to Hatsumei, who was pale, sweating and trying very hard not to gasp for air. Yumiko made a hand sign and erected a silence barrier as Hatsumei lifted his hand from the seal. Those inside the silence barrier could hear the seal snap back into place like a thunderclap. To Neji Hanabi and Hinata though, it was completely silent.

Hatsumei climbed unsteadily back to his feet, collected his scroll and leaned on Yumiko as they left the echo well, the secret of the Birdcage Seal in tow.

\_ The Fukusei Clan possesses a very dangerous kekkai genkai common to the Land of Lust in addition to their uncanny ability to transform into bats. Any child of a Fukusei will inherit all kekkai genkai from both parents without fail, even if that kekkai genkai was dormant in the other parent. For example Hatsumei and Yumiko's third teammate Himitsu Senju is half Uchiha, but while she does have the Senju Clan's Wood Release, she does \_\_\*\*not\*\*\_\_ have the Sharingan. If Himitsu and Hatsumei had a child, the child would have the Fukusei's Komouri (their bat abilities), the Senju's Wood Release, \_\_\*\*and\*\*\_\_ the Sharingan. This possibility has made all kekkai genkai clans extremely wary of mingling with the Fukusei because they know that if their gifts are added to the Fukusei arsenal, then their clans will quickly become second rate. As such, when the Hyuga Council of Elders learned of Yumiko's relationship with Hatsumei, they attempted to forbid the relationship. Yumiko fought through the pain of the Birdcage Seal and threatened to go rogue and take Hatsumei with her if the Council did not yield on the matter. As Yumiko is at this point widely considered to be the most formidable Hyuga in several generations, the Council gave up and allowed the relationship to move forward. If they hadn't, in a few generations the Hyuga would've been faced with a clan possessed of all their gifts and many, many more, which would be tantamount to their rapid extinction.\_

\_\*\*NOTES ON MY REDESIGNED HIDDEN LEAF VILLAGE\*\*\_

\_ Hidden Leaf is built in the tree tops of one of the largest swamps in the world, which was formed when a battle between Madara Uchiha and Hashirama Senju blasted out a canyon and rerouted a river into it. After that battle, the two rivals agreed that they were too evenly matched and their battles far too destructive for them to keep going like they had been. The two then signed a treaty between their clans and the clans allied to theirs, and thus the Village Hidden in the Leaves was formed and quickly built as Madara and Hashirama competed to see who could finish their end of it first, Madara clearing the rubble and carving the canals to feed the trees with the river they had accidentally rerouted, or Hashirama growing the trees with his Wood Release. \_

\_ There's a floor of branches woven so tightly that it's almost

completely solid, and there's dirt on top of it, so aside from the odd hole here and there, it's almost like a patch of earth was picked up by the trees' branches as they grew, which actually is the case with the Hokage compound. You see Madara and Hashirama weren't quite fighting as they raced, but they were still shooting trees, landslides and small explosions at each other the whole time. One particularly powerful earth jutsu from Madara launched a massive slab of stone at Hashirama, only for Hashirama to catch it with a mass of rapidly growing trees. The stone was quickly carried skyward and held there. Hashirama and Madara didn't notice until it was pointed out to them afterwards, and upon seeing it realized they could make their new village even safer by placing it in the trees rather than beneath them. Thus did the Village Hidden in the Leaves get its name. They then combined their power to raise the Hokage mesa with all the loose earth they had upended.\_

\_ There are areas that require bridges on the "ground" floor of the village because there are gaps between clumps of trees, that was intentional because it allows for the possibility of cutting the bridges in the event of an attack. Some of the bridges are metal and stone, but most of them are either rope or cable bridges. The sewage systems go right down to the roots of the trees to fertilize them, and the ultra black ops ANBU division known as Root is situated beneath the village.\_

\_ There at least fifteen tree "clumps" which are basically the clans' personal districts. Each one is different but they do share a bit in the way of an overarching architectural style. There are two common areas, the Hokage tower, which is basically central command and the town hall, and the entrance/market area. The Academy is a part of the Hokage Tower Compound, which contains Hidden Leaf's communications tower and central armory as well.\_

\_ The Hyuga clan all live in one huge ginormous manor which is loaded with anti-intruder measures to prevent sneaks and thieves. They're a very secretive bunch. Hyuga Manor is mostly stone metal and cut wood.\_

\_ The Uchiha district is largely comprised of several little individual stand alone houses with wide airy streets. Several of the houses are built around the trunks of trees, \_\_and are mostly made of metal and light stone tiles due to the Uchiha clan's fiery jutsu.\_

\_ The only buildings built from the living trees are in the Senju district and Hokage compound, they are grown that way by Senju Wood Release. The Aburame have a sort of hive like communal dwelling, which is rather close but not quite the same and has been described as architecture somewhere between Hyuga Manor and the Senju district.\_

\_ The Namikaze district is the highest in the village, being built right up in the tree tops so they can feel the wind and see for miles around. Houses in the Namikaze district are typically built of woven wood and metal. If people built bird nests, the Namikaze clan's abodes would be what they'd look like.\_

\_ The Fukusei residences are built up on the sides of their trees, mostly lumber with metal reinforcements. \_\_The Inuzuka houses are dome shaped, mostly earth and wood like burrows\_

\_and there aren't many of them because they like to keep their family close, so they are quite large. The Nara/Might clan lives out on the edge of the village closest to the Hokage monument because they keep deer up on top of the tabletop mountain the Hokage monument is cut into. Their houses are a lot like those in the Uchiha district.\_

\_ The Yamanaka clan lives close to the entrance and their houses are mostly timber with lots of windows and natural lighting. Not as much as the Namikaze clan has, but more than most anyone else. The Sarutobi clan is very close to the Hokage compound and is also mostly timber and thatch roofed stone buildings. The Shimura are kinda like the Hyuga, they're one of the only clans with a sure enough compound of their own, and it looks like a Japanese castle except with smoke stacks in every corner for their forges.\_

\_ The Hatake's have a compound, but it's by far the least imposing "compound" in the village. There's basically a timber fence around the perimeter of their district and it can only be accessed by bridge. Inside it's mostly tents. Some of the coolest and most ornate "tents" you've ever seen, but due to their canvas siding, tents they are. Why canvas? because it's cheap. The Hatake's are by and large a bunch of tightwads.\_

\_ And finally the Akimichi tend to have rather ramshackle dwellings, tidier than the Inuzuka and sturdier than the Hatakes, but still rather slummy. They do have the best cooks in the village though, and they're only in slummy housing because they believe good food and good cheer are more important than material goods.\_

#### \_\*\*CULTURAL NOTES AND OTHER BACKGROUND INFO\*\*\_

\_ Due to the high adrenaline life style they lead, shinobi are often hot headed when not on a mission due to the high levels of stress their work entails. Since they are also all highly combative and often beat the crap out of each other during training, they are also sometimes quite physically expressive with their emotions. It is not uncommon for a brawl to somehow become a bonding experience between shinobi who might have mere seconds before been trying to rearrange each others' skeletal structure, particularly when alcohol is involved. This is sometimes attributed to shinobi developing respect for each other based on combat prowess and often times being able to tell things about their opponents' personalities by how they fight.\_

\_ They are also frequently lacking in modesty of any sort. This is because kunoichi are just as much rough and tumble hotheads as their male counterparts in an exceptionally egalitarian society. What rare trace of prudishness exists is largely a facade put up by "noble" clans to make themselves seem aloof and better than everyone else. Another component of this is that many kunoichi are familiar with the psychological hazards of undercover missions which can involve taking lovers as part of their disguise only to be forced to turn around and kill said lovers when the mission demands it. They are trained for seduction and detachment from their emotions from an early age in preparation for the day they may have to take such a mission. \_

\_ This leads them to often take lovers, because even if such a mission never comes their way, they've been warned of how devastating those missions can be and have learned that having experience with romance can help. Relationships frequently form in mixed gender teams

due to the high levels of camaraderie, time spent in each other's company and the shared high stress experiences. About three out of every five such relationships do bloom into long lasting and happy relationships as shinobi, both male and female, are extremely loyal to those they care about. Kunoichi can take multiple lovers with total impunity due to the unexpected perks of clone techniques which allow them to create disposable bodies at will, allowing them to remain chaste and at the same time very much not. That's how they're raised and as a result it is common knowledge among those with knowledge of shinobi villages that kunoichi usually make the bar none best lovers, provided they're not there to kill you of course, which is always a risk.\_

\_ Shinobi are all trained to be well mannered, kunoichi even more so than the men, but they often dispense with such things the moment they return to the rough and ready atmosphere of their villages. Their villages are where they come home to in order to recuperate and relax after stressful missions, they don't have time or space of mind for going out of their way to be well mannered. Friendly yes, formal in their manners or gentle in their speech, usually not.\_

\_ "Rivals" are a common thing in many ninja villages, but most especially Hidden Leaf. This is because of the history of Hidden Leaf's founders Madara Uchiha and Hashirama Senju, whose life long rivalry drove them to heights of strength and power that rivaled the Great Spirits allowing them to be the first to ever seal the Tailed Beasts into Jinchuriki. Rivals are usually picked from one's classmates at the academy, usually with one of the two being more skilled than the other. The weaker of the two strives to surpass their rival, and the stronger strives to keep ahead. This leads to much mutual respect and often friendship between rivals, although sometimes it takes a while.\_

\_ Shinobi villages are typically far more advanced than the general population of the Empire and surrounding lands. The Land of Lightning's Village Hidden in the Clouds and the Village Hidden in the Rain are both havens of genius spurred on to ever greater heights by constant warfare, and are thus arguably two of the most advanced settlements in the world, even far outclassing other shinobi villages. The samurai fortifications in Land of Iron are also home to considerably advanced technology. All three possess technology which seems almost like magic to those unfamiliar with advanced technology. The recently formed Village Hidden in the Sound is rumored to have comparable technology. The Hidden Leaf and Sand villages are the next most advanced having technology such as electric lighting and heat, photography and sound systems.\_

\_\*\*THE EMPIRE\*\*\_

\_ In Vermillion Thunder, all canon shinobi villages and lands are provinces of the Empire. The Empire is centered in the Land of Jade and ruled by the Tokugawa Dynasty, who are the hereditary Jinchuriki of the Celestial Golden Dragon. The lands which surround the Empire are ruled by the ancient Demon Lords Pride, Greed, Wrath, Sloth, Gluttony and Envy, and are named after their respective masters. The seventh, the Land of Lust, saw its Demon Lord sealed away by the Sannin of the Hidden Leaf Village 30 years ago and has since become a raging warzone between Pride, the warlords of Greed and the Empire.

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\_ The Lands of Fire, Wind, Earth, Water and Lightning are named after the great spirits that roam there and the most common chakra natures in those regions. The Land of Iron is the birthplace of samurai culture, and as such is named after the metal that their blades were once made from and the strength of will that defines the Samurai. The Land of Jade is named for its lush fields, verdant forests and jade mines. The Lands of Waterfalls, Rice Paddies and Waves are named after geographical features, and the Land of Rain is named for its almost constant rain. \_

\_ Shinobi villages are normally located in all the Empire's lands/provinces except for the Land of Jade because the other lands are the Empire's border lands where strife is rife and there is much work for shinobi. There is one shinobi village in the Land of Jade, the Village Hidden in the Grass, but it is often considered the weakest of the major Hidden Villages in shinobi circles. There are many small shinobi settlements scattered throughout the lands although their number is dwindling as more and more move to the greater shinobi villages.\_

\_ Uprisings are frequent in the Empire due to demonic influences, which has led to several civil wars. The most recent involved an allied uprising in the lands of Lightning and Earth, which unlike most would be revolutions actually managed to spill over into the Land of Jade, a rare occurrence demonstrating just how massive and fierce a war it was. Civil wars are most frequent in the turbulent and tumultuous Land of Water, which has a large excess of feudal lords (politicians), pirates and ports. This has led to Hidden Mist being one of the least advanced and least stable of shinobi villages, and the Oda Clan which rules the Land of Water to be the least envied of the Five Great Houses.\_

\_ The workings, politics and geography of the other lands will be explained in later volumes. I've only got room to explain the Land of Fire, which is where the Hidden Leaf Village is, in this particular chapter.\_

### \_\*\*The Land of Fire\*\*\_

\_ The Land of Fire is one of the major regions of the Empire, as well as one of its most formidable. Located on the northern border of the Land of Jade, the Land of Fire borders more regions than any other, including the Land of Greed. The Land of Fire is home to many of the Empire's foot soldiers, and one of the most populated regions in the Empire. It has one of the strongest militaries in the Empire as its high population, easy terrain, and numerous borders make it an ideal region for trade and other commercial endeavors such as mining and agriculture, and one of the regions called upon for reinforcements most frequently due to its central location.\_

\_ The Land of Fire is ruled over by House Heian, and above the Heian family is the Imperial family. Ruling under the Heian Family are numerous minor lords who often squabble among themselves and will often hire shinobi, often from the Leaf Village, but sometimes from other villages when they want to be more discreet, to sabotage each other. This squabbling and back biting is allowed as it keeps the minor lords sharp in the event of invasion, and keeps them from getting too chummy with each other. This is something the Imperial Government is keen to prevent since the last war, one of the most ferocious in decades, was orchestrated by a vast alliance of minor

lords from the lands of Lightning and Earth, many of whom were not openly affiliated just "chummy", making it extremely difficult to know who was on what side.\_

\_ The Land of Fire is well known as one of the strongest regions of the Empire, its samurai having established an exceptionally fearsome reputation throughout the course of many wars. The Hidden Leaf Village is also regarded as one of the most powerful shinobi villages as it is the traditional home to the Jinchuriki of the Nine Tailed Fox (arguably the most powerful of the Tailed Beasts), has turned out such notable figures as the Third and Fourth Hokages and the legendary Sannin, and is home to the world renowned Uchiha, Senju and Hyuga clans.\_

## 20. Chapter 16: THE RETURN

=Chapter 16-The Return=

"Sasuke, I need you to tell us everything about Itachi! Right now!" Naruto called over his shoulder to Sasuke who was clinging to his back like a monkey while he carried Sakura in his arms. "Itachi's former ANBU Black Ops, and he specializes in genjutsu, fire techniques and swordplay! He was one of the interrogators because of his Mangekyo Sharingan, which gave him a jutsu only he can use called the Tsukuyomi! He did something the night of the massacre, I don't know what, but we know from the bodies that every Mangekyo Sharingan in the Uchiha clan went active that night!" Something suddenly blindsided Naruto and sent the three of them crashing to the ground.

Itachi stood over them, "You're right Sasuke, and I'm glad to see yours did too. No doubt that's how you detected my approach, not that it did you any good. Now let me explain to you what's going to happen. You and the Jinchuriki are going to come with us quietly, or I'll use my deadliest jutsu on your little pink haired friend there, but not before I use my Tsukuyomi on her." Sasuke grinned up at him, "Actually Itachi, you're going to die. Right here, right now."

Itachi raised an eyebrow and then Sakura, Sasuke and Naruto exploded as the paper bombs beneath their jackets went off. Itachi was blasted across the street, revealed to be a shadow clone as the blast demolished a large portion of the street. Two blocks over Sasuke looked at Naruto as they ran, "Did it work?" Itachi exploded out of an alleyway behind them, "I'd say no!" Sakura replied, "At what point do we turn and fight?!"

"I need my hands first!" Naruto exclaimed, "I can't fight these guys like this!" "Then put me down!" Sakura ordered. "Just a sec," Naruto suddenly jumped onto the rooftops and bounced across three or four streets in as many leaps. He set Sakura and Sasuke down and pressed splayed fingers to his stomach, "Seal Release First Tail!" He roared and suddenly orange chakra flared to life around him. He twisted further, "Second Tail!" he roared and the chakra became a small bonfire around him as a second fox tail erupted into being and his teeth became fangs. When he opened his eyes they were orange.

He roared and the sound could be heard from miles away as he grinned and settled into a feral crouch, "Now then let's go avenge the Uchiha

Clan. Shadow Army Jutsu!" He roared again and without a single hand sign, body sized masses of chakra exploded off of him, quickly forming into shadow clones of Naruto cloaked in the fiery chakra of the Nine Tails. Sasuke stared as the clones bounded back towards where Itachi was leaping up to the rooftops to continue chasing them.

The Naruto clones all leapt and roared in unison, "RAIJIN BALLISTA!" and unleashed a massive coordinated barrage of thunder release. Suddenly a shadowy form leapt up from the street next to them and dove among them, even as their massive assault demolished the block where Itachi had been. The shadowy being laid about itself with a massive spiky sword and Naruto hissed in consternation as he felt none of his shadow clones returning to him and the huge figure somehow stopped all his jutsu in their tracks.

Just then though they had more pressing concerns as Itachi leapt up behind them, and blew out a massive fire ball that took the shape of a dragon's head right at them. Sasuke spun and countered with a fire blast of his own as Itachi landed. Naruto grinned over his shoulder, "Hey guys, number 13?" Sakura and Sasuke nodded as Sasuke broke off his fire-blasting contest with Itachi. Naruto quickly grabbed them both and leapt away, Itachi quickly chasing after them, his partner still busy with the mass of Naruto clones fighting him.

Itachi pulled up short as Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura whirled on him, "SQUAD SEVEN SPECIAL! FORCES OF NATURE!" They sprang forward, Sakura going low, Sasuke in the middle and Naruto high. Sakura's fist crashed into the rooftop Itachi was standing on and it promptly collapsed, sending him tumbling into the building below. Then Sasuke and Naruto unleashed a simultaneous Raijin Ballista and Dragon Fire Jutsu. The resulting hurricane of energy utterly annihilated the building and everything in it.

As the three of them landed in the street, warily eyeballing the ruins of the building for any sign of movement, Itachi coughed behind them, "Nice try." Sasuke spun and swung as his sickle and chain erupted from its seal in his armor. Itachi sprang back and narrowly dodged the massive weight as Sasuke began spinning it. Sakura nodded and as the slight movement drew Itachi's eye, Naruto unleashed a massive burst of flame at him.

Itachi sprang back and suddenly Sakura leapt through the flames, quickly catching hold of him. Just as black flames flared to life around his hand as she started to squeeze, she exploded. Itachi was blasted backwards, badly burned and stunned as the shadow clone dissipated. Then Sasuke sprang out of the flames, his sickle slamming into Itachi's chest as he sprang away. Suddenly a tremendous yank on the chain of Sasuke's sickle ripped Itachi from his feet and forward into a full body punch from Sakura.

As Itachi's mouth was rid of unbroken teeth and his jaw shattered, Naruto completed the spin and slung Itachi down the street. Itachi bellowed in pain as the sickle ripped clear of his chest and went rolling and skidding down the street. He finally skidded to a stop and after a second managed to push himself partially upright. He glared at them and then his eyes erupted into black flames, "\_A'e'e'a'oo!"\_

The black flames rocketed towards them and they sprang aside, the jet

black bolt of flames rocketing past them and immediately obliterating a building at the end of the street in an explosion of black flames. As Naruto Sakura and Sasuke picked themselves up, they saw Itachi already rising to his feet, the black flames fading as chakra flowed from his hand to his destroyed face, quickly healing it.

A second later, he lowered his hand and rolled his jaw, "Alright, now the kid gloves are coming off. You won't dodge this." His eyes started glowing with black flames again and he folded his hands into a hand-sign, "Shadow clone Jutsu!" Suddenly there were four Itachi's all with black flames raging in their eye sockets as they yelled, "AMETERASU ENTRAPMENT!" A river of black flames suddenly surged towards them, far too large to evade.

Sasuke hugged Sakura to them as the flames were nearly upon them, expecting to be dead in the next second. Then strangely, they weren't. Jiraiya smiled down at them, "Why don't you three take a break? We'll take it from here." He suddenly disappeared with a quick hand sign and Naruto crawled to the edge of the rooftop Jiraiya had set them on, watching in awe as Jiraiya effortlessly evaded Itachi's attacks and planted kunai in four of the Itachis in seconds.

Just as the original looked sure to hit him, Jiraiya raised a hand, "Space-time Barrier!" The black flames disappeared into a seal that appeared out of nowhere and Itachi only narrowly managed to dodge as they erupted out of another seal behind him. Sasuke and Sakura crawled over next to him, staring in awe as Jiraiya effortlessly connected with a glowing ball of chakra that launched Itachi down the street and through a building.

Jiraiya disappeared again and they saw a massive ball of chakra appear over Itachi's fallen form, just as Jiraiya slammed it into him, "Big Ball Rasengan!" The resultant explosion was enough to catapult Jiraiya spinning through the air back towards them where he landed in a pose and rolled his head with a massive grin, "You shall never forget the day you lost to the one, the only, the mighty \_TOOOAD SAAAGE!\_"

Then Itachi appeared in front of him, completely unscathed, his red eyes boring into Jiraiya's as the Tsukuyomi took effect. The \_real\_ Jiraiya, along with several shadow clones, appeared and collapsed as their Transparent Escape Jutsu failed under the power of the Tsukuyomi racing through their shared chakra and into their minds. The Jiraiya clones dissipated in bursts of smoke and Itachi turned to Squad Seven just in time to catch Naruto's Raijin Scythe to his face. Itachi exploded into a puff of smoke and reappeared above them, slamming a pair of katana into Naruto's shoulders as he landed on him, pinning Naruto to the ground. Itachi threw a pair of kunai into his hands and knocked him out with the Tsukuyomi. Then another shadow clone appeared and hurled Sakura to the street below before they turned to confront Sasuke, "Time to finish what I started."

They advanced on Sasuke, who scrambled backwards as the Itachis drew their swords. Sasuke wasn't sure how he knew, but he knew to twist left as the real Itachi swung towards his right from behind him. He spun and knocked Itachi's feet from under him before blowing out a Fireball Jutsu at the shadow clones, instantly dispelling them both. He back flipped away as Itachi started picking himself up. Then he was aware of a massive shadow behind him and spun to see the huge figure with the sword holding an unconscious Kakashi in one hand

while the other held the massive spiky blade resting on his shoulder, "You lose kid."

Itachi smiled as he stood, "Kisame, I wonder if you would mind dealing with the Jinchuriki while I take care of Sasuke." Kisame tossed Kakashi off the roof, "Sure, my pleasure. Samehada's acquired the taste of the Nine Tails and decided it's pretty tasty." He shoved Sasuke over to Itachi who spun and kicked him flat. Sasuke rolled and just barely had time to register the shadowy figure with the glowing red eye behind Itachi before...

\_WHOOMPH!\_ There was a massive sound as something flashed through Itachi. Itachi stopped in his tracks and went to turn, only for his entire top half to promptly fall off, neatly severed from his hip to his shoulder as the shadowy figure behind him straightened, the massive weapon in his hand streaked with Itachi's blood. The shadowy figure turned to the one Itachi had called Kisame, "Tell your master that the Uchiha clan has been avenged, and I will be coming for him soon enough."

Kisame readied his sword, "And who are you to make me do anything?" The shadowy figure disappeared and reappeared behind Kisame. There was a flash and Kisame had just enough time to look startled before he collapsed, his head bouncing away down the roof top as the shadowy figure's crimson eye seemed to flare particularly bright, "I am Madara Uchiha."

\_Yes! He is here! The one! The only! The great, powerful and no longer addicted to absurdly complex schemes to "make the world a better place", ladies and gentlemen, shinobi of all ages, please give a warm welcome back, to the mighty MADARA UCHIHA!\_

\_Some of you are probably thinking that because he has only one eye, I might be talking about Obito-Madara rather than Madara-Madara. I am talking about Madara-Madara. This is the real deal, and the reason for him having one eye will be explained in the next chapter.\_

\_How did he get there? I know you're thinking Deus Ex Machina, but it's not. That will also be explained in the next chapter.\_

\_Yes Kisame was able to beat Kakashi because Samehada's ability to absorb chakra negated Kakashi's Chidori Cloud Shield (Kakashi loads scrolls with lightning chakra and can manipulate them around him to form a highly versatile shield of lightning which up til now has never failed him) and caught him by surprise. Otherwise Kakashi would probably have won.\_

\_Yes Jiraiya is here too! Yes he knows the Fourth Hokage's Teleportation and Space-Time Barrier Jutsus.\_

\_Tsukuyomi got Jiraiya because Tsukuyomi can hit every mind connected to the target's, which in this case was all of Jiraiya's shadow clones and the original.\_

\_Yes Itachi and Kisame are dead now. Madara just killed them. Sorry Itachi and Kisame fans, we will not be seeing them again in this story. That's just how the dice fell. If you want more Itachi and Kisame, I strongly recommend "The Somewhat Cracked Mind of Itachi Uchiha" by Keerea. Kisame will also be a rather prominent character in my other work Naruto Fractured, being one of the main characters

of a steady B-Plot.\_

\_Yes Sasuke's Mangekyo Sharingan \_\_\*\*has\*\*\_\_ gone active. It's been active this whole time because in Vermillion Thunder, Mangekyo Sharingan's don't revert back to normal Sharingan's, they stay active, but the jutsu they bestow are still voluntary. I'm going to make a post sometime about how Mangekyo Sharingan's work in Vermillion Thunder because it is very different from canon, and I'll either put a link to it on my profile page or more likely include it in the notes of one of the extra chapters (the ones labeled #.5).\_

\_Raijin Ballista is the full, both arms version of Raijin Scythe.\_

\_Naruto can execute jutsu without hand signs while his Tailed Beast Cloak is up because the Nine Tails can make hand seals and execute jutsu with its chakra within its confinement when Naruto loosens the seal. Naruto does not go around all the time with the Nine Tails' first tail out, the tail he usually has is just a transformation.\_

## 21. Chapter 17: Madara

=Chapter 17-Madara=

The self introduced Madara Uchiha strode down the roof top towards Itachi and unceremoniously grabbed Itachi's top half before dragging it up towards Sasuke, "Child we must work quickly if your family's gifts are to be saved. There is no time for explanations, now hold still." Before Sasuke could protest, Madara's hand snapped out and covered Sasuke's eyes. An instant later Sasuke bellowed in pain as his eyes felt like they were spontaneously combusting.

==A Few Days Later==

Sasuke opened his eyes, not entirely sure where he was. A head full of white hair with a single eye suddenly obscured his vision, "Good you're awake." He held up two fingers, "How many fingers?" "Two but you flicked a thumb out and back really quick," Sasuke replied blearily. "Good," Madara replied, "Fast motion tracking seems to be working, now can you see anything unusual?" "An old guy with an eye-patch asking me how many fingers he's holding up," Sasuke quipped, then his eyebrows furrowed, "Wait, what's," his vision was suddenly ringed by darkness and Madara leapt back as the Ameterasu burst to life around Sasuke's eyes.

Sasuke blinked in surprise and sat up looking around, Madara immediately ducking and weaving to avoid falling under his gaze, "Turn that off!" he ordered. Sasuke blinked and the Ameterasu went out. Madara straightened up, "That's one of your Mangekyo jutsus. I've been examining your eyes since I combined them with your brother's, they seem to have achieved an incredible amount of stability and are somehow self-sustaining without the need to draw on your chakra. It's very interesting." Sasuke's eyes snapped up, "Infinite Mangekyo."

Madara looked at him, "What?" "Itachi called it an Infinite Mangekyo, he thought it would be self sustaining and power its Mangekyo Jutsu

itself rather than drawing on the users chakra. He was thinking about it right before he died," Sasuke explained as he took in the white sheets that formed the walls of the tiny room they were in. Madara tilted his head to the side, "How could you possibly know that?" "That's my Mangekyo jutsu, I can hear people's thoughts, and earlier I shared my thoughts with Sakura and Naruto." Madara nodded, "Interesting, that's a very powerful jutsu." Sasuke nodded with a smile, "It helped me snap out of a genjutsu yesterday and today it helped us fight Itachi. Thank you by the way," Sasuke added. Madara smiled, "That's what family is for, and actually it's been two days."

Sasuke looked around, "Where are we?" Then he realized he couldn't hear his friends' minds and for some reason couldn't grow alarmed, even though he knew he should be, "Where are my friends?" Madara turned and pointed to outside the curtain, "They're still sleeping. It's best to let them rest, they took quite a hit from Itachi's genjutsu. Kakashi woke up yesterday, but he passed out again after ensuring you were all safe. You feel funny because of the painkillers."

Sasuke blinked, "Painkillers?" Madara smiled, "Good, that means they're working." Sasuke frowned, "Wait, how do you know Kakashi?" Madara smiled and tapped his good eye, "I have the match to his eye." Sasuke blinked, "What? I thought Kakashi got his eye from his teammate Obito." Madara nodded, "He did. I switched eyes with Obito after I saved his life." Sasuke frowned, "I thought Obito was dead..."

Madara shook his head as he sat down, "No, he and Rin have been living with me in the Land of Jade since their supposed demise." Sasuke frowned, "Why?" "So that nobody would know I was still alive," Madara replied, "I saved their lives with my Mangekyo jutsu the Zetsu, if they had returned to Hidden Leaf, people would have known it had to be me that had saved them because nobody else knows how to make Zetsu. I didn't leave on a good note you know."

Sasuke nodded wearily, "Ok," he yawned, "Is it alright if I go back to sleep now?" Madara nodded with a pleasant smile, "Of course." Sasuke laid back down and was snoring again in seconds. Madara rose and stepped outside where he was immediately pounced by Sakura, "Is he okay Lord Madara? What did he say?" Madara caught her shoulders, "It's alright Sakura, he's just fine. He asked how everyone was doing, I told him you were fine, and his eyes have taken to their new components perfectly. He can already use the Ameterasu. He should be okay to walk soon."

Sakura nodded, a relieved smile on her face, "Okay good. I'm glad he's alright." Madara smiled, "He is very lucky to have a woman like you looking after him." Sakura blushed, then turned and looked out the mouth of the mountain cave where they had taken refuge after the battle with Itachi and Kisame, "Do you think the others will be okay?" Madara smiled as he walked over to the mouth of the cave, "A Jinchuriki of the Nine-Tailed Fox, Kakashi Hatake and Jiraiya of the Sannin, yes I think they will be fine."

He turned and smiled at her, "After all, we can be at their side in an instant using the Kamui jutsu." He walked back in and patted her on the shoulder on his way to the cooking fire, "Don't worry. Those three will be enough to handle anything the world can throw at them"

short of an army, and even then, I think they could make it back in one piece. Jiraiya and Naruto have two of the most immense chakra reserves I've ever seen inside them."

"My own reserves pale in comparison to what those two have up their sleeves," he added as he sat down and poured himself a cup of tea. "Trust me," he continued as he poured and handed Sakura a cup, "They'll be fine and we'll be on our way back to Hidden Leaf in no time. It'll be good to see home again," he added with a faraway look in his eye. Sakura looked at him in surprise, "You're coming with us?"

Madara nodded, "Yes, I think I have been in hiding long enough, and I cannot keep my grandchildren from their rightful home any longer." Sakura blinked and looked at him, "Grandchildren?!" Madara nodded, "Obito is like a son to me, so that makes his and Rin's children my grandchildren. They've heard about the Village Hidden in the Leaves all their lives, I think it's time they saw it for themselves." Sakura blinked and then smiled, "I'm sure they'll love it." Madara smiled, "I know they will."

==Fifteen Years Earlier==

Madara jumped as something thudded to the ground behind him and whirled, the scythe he carried with him instantly at the ready. He blinked as he realized that whatever it was wasn't moving, he strode closer as his brother Izuna's spirit, forever bonded to his body as the symbiotic ooze known as a Zetsu spoke in his mind, \_"brother, I think that's one of ours!"\_ "So it is," Madara muttered aloud as he crouched and examined the utterly wrecked body on the ground before him, the one narrowly open eye a red Sharingan.

Madara carefully opened the eye, "A Mangekyo! So that's how he got down here!" He sheathed his scythe across his back and hefted the broken body easily with Izuna's Zetsu strength, "Can we fix him?" \_"Do dogs leave piles of crap in the road for people to step on? Of course we can fix him!"\_ A moment later a white substance began bubbling from the rubbery black coating that was Izuna's Zetsu form and it flowed over the broken body, quickly repairing it as Madara walked back towards the cave that served as his home.

By the time Madara had made it home three days later, the boy's body, formerly entirely crushed on the right side, had been entirely rebuilt by Izuna's Zetsu. Madara had barely set the boy down when his eye snapped open and he started looking around, "AH!" Madara sprang back, after a century of quiet except for his telepathic bickering with Izuna, the boy's exclamation of surprise was like a thunder clap. The boy sat up and started looking around frantically, "Where am I? Am I dead?!"

"No you're not dead!" Madara barked, "You came close but you're not dead!" The boy looked at him and then nearly leapt from the bed as he saw Madara's scythe, "Are you Death?! Please don't kill me! I don't wanna die!" Madara's eye twitched, "I'm not gonna kill you unless you keep screaming!" he barked, "And I'm not Death! I'm human!" The boy immediately quieted down, still wide eyed with terror, then he tentatively opened his mouth, "Hey, are you an Uchiha?" Madara's chest instantly swelled with pride, "Yes I am! I am Madara Uchiha! And this is my brother Izuna," he added, pointing to a blob which suddenly grew out of his shoulder and took the form of a head to say

with a smile, "Hi."

The boy was about to scream in terror when Madara pointed a finger at him, "Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah! Remember what I said about screaming?!" The boy immediately covered his mouth with both hands and wide eyes, still clearly terrified. Madara smiled as Izuna pulled his head back in, "Now then, who are you?" The boy blinked, "I'm, Obito Uchiha." Then he clasped his hands to the side of his head, "Oh crap Rin and Kakashi!" He leapt upright, "I've gotta get back!"

Madara extended a hand, "Wait! If you leave the radius of our jutsu your body will collapse and you'll die in minutes!" Obito stopped and looked at him, "But, Kakashi and Rin...I can't abandon them!" Madara frowned, "Well you can't leave my range without dying!" "So come with me!" Madara blinked and then thought about it for a moment, "Isn't there a war on up there now?" "Yes!" Obito said quickly, "And we have to blow up Kannabi bridge or Hidden Leaf might lose!" Madara's head snapped up, "Hidden Leaf \_lose?!\_"

He sprang spinning backwards through the air to the wall, where he clung, effortlessly defying gravity as he declared, "NEVER." He grabbed a huge gunbai from where it was leaned against the wall, "I may not be able to go home because of my quarrels with Hashirama, but I'm not letting what we worked so hard to build crumble." He sprang back to the floor, "Let's go kid." He made a one handed hand sign, "Earth Style! Rampart Shattering!"

The wall suddenly exploded, a tunnel opening up before the dust even started settling. Obito sprang to his feet and took off down the tunnel after the rapidly shrinking figure of the legendary Madara Uchiha. Madara suddenly paused for Obito to catch up and extended a hand to him as he skidded to a halt next to him, white Zetsu mass flowing down his arm and over Obito's body as Madara grinned, "Keep up boy, we've got a lot of ground to cover."

==Two Days Later==

Kakashi stared at Rin, "WHAT?!" "You have to kill me Kakashi!" Rin begged, "Please! If I go back to Hidden Leaf the Tailed Beast will be freed and the village will be destroyed! They'll keep chasing us until we get there! And if we stop they'll knock us out and drag me back! Killing me is the only way!" Suddenly a Mist nin appeared, "How right you are, sadly though little girl, I don't think your friend has it in him to kill you."

Kakashi activated his Lightning Cutter as more Mist nin appeared, "No but I \_will\_ kill all of you!" His shoulder was promptly jerked backwards by the impact of a kunai, "Is that a fact?" The leader of the Mist nin asked mockingly. Just as Kakashi's Lightning Cutter started to fizzle out, Rin grabbed his hand and jabbed it through her chest, glaring defiantly at the Mist nin as she snarled, "I'll \_never\_ betray my village!"

Then they both collapsed, Kakashi quickly trying to scramble upright, "RIN! NO!" The leader of the Mist nin scratched his head, "Huh, the little bit-" he was cut off midsentence, his eyes widening as he suddenly collapsed. "Watch your mouth," Obito growled as he ripped his kunai from the Mist nin's neck and ran to Kakashi and Rin. Kakashi stared as Obito knelt next to him and tossed his hand from the bloody hole in Rin's chest. Rin's eyes widened as the light

started to fade from them, "Obi..." "Don't talk, just stay with me," Obito instructed quickly, laying his hand to her chest.

Kakashi stared in shock as white Zetsu matter hurriedly began flowing into the wound, quickly rebuilding Rin's heart, starting with just a single furiously pumping chamber and then rapidly expanding to two and then all four as Obito hissed, "come on, come on!" Kakashi sat up and pulled the kunai from his shoulder as Rin's eyes grew more alert by the second, "Obito, how are you alive? How are you doing that?" Obito grinned, "I made a new friend."

Kakashi jumped a little as someone fell from the sky, "WHOOOOOOOOOOOOO! YAHAAHAHAHAHA!" Suddenly a black clad form was springing among the casually watching Mist nin, swinging a huge gunbai and a scythe with murderous abandon, cutting down an enemy ninja with every swing, war whooping wildly as though it were the most fun he'd had in years.

"THIS IS THE MOST FUN I'VE HAD IN A HUNDRED YEARS!" Madara yelled happily as he chased the Mist nin down and slaughtered them. None of them made it far, Madara was much too fast. When they tried to fight he butchered them, when they tried to run he planted kunai in their backs from incredible distances with absurd throws. Over hand, under hand, coming around and thrown mid swing, over the shoulder with the opposite hand, shot from the bottom of his foot, it didn't matter how he threw, if he threw a kunai, it hit its target perfectly. Obito didn't much care though, he was too busy hugging Rin close as the Zetsu rebuilt her destroyed torso, "Don't ever scare me like that again," he whispered as tears stained his cheeks.

Kakashi put a hand on Obito's shoulder, "Don't you ever scare us like that again." Obito grinned, "Trust me, I don't want to, I thought I was dead too!" Rin smiled and coughed slightly as the Zetsu finished its work on her heart and moved onto her lung, "Kakashi, could I have a minute alone with Obito?" Kakashi blinked and then his face lit with understanding and he stood up and walked a few steps away, not far, but far enough to provide a little privacy.

Rin weakly raised a hand to Obito's cheek, "You know, right after we lost you, Kakashi told me something." Obito blinked as his cheeks reddened slightly, "What?" Rin smiled, "He said you love me." Obito blinked and a bashful smile spread across his face, "Well yes, I do. More than anything really." Rin smiled, "Well, until now, I, didn't realize that-" She coughed again and Obito willed the Zetsu to hurry up a little in case she was in pain as she continued, "I think I was falling for you too."

Suddenly Madara was next to them, "Ah actually that's the Zetsu linking your minds, what one of you feels the other feels. So if one of you is in love with the other the other will reciprocate while the two are connected. You'll be able to hear each others' thoughts if you stay connected long enough." Obito shot him a glare, "Did you have to ruin the moment like that?"

Madara crossed his arms, "I just saved both your lives! And by the way, you two are stuck with me because you can't leave the Zetsu's radius, so even if this is just a nascent crush seeded by the bond the Zetsu formed, it'll grow while you two are together until such time as we're able to find a way around the limits of the Zetsu! I haven't ruined the moment at all, I've just given you wonderful news!

You get an extended vacation, a great new tutor and time to grow closer and fall in love with each other!"

Obito and Rin stared at him as Kakashi convulsed with snickers, trying his hardest not to burst out laughing. Madara glared at him, "You think I'm joking?!" He suddenly reappeared right behind Kakashi in a crouch with his hands folded into a tiger hand sign, "\_Leaf Village Secret Finger Jutsu!\_" Kakashi had just enough time to realize something very bad was about to happen before, "\_\*\*ONE THOUSAND YEARS OF DEATH!\*\*\_" Kakashi flew through the air grasping his bottom and howling in pain and embarrassment as Obito and Rin finally burst out laughing.

==Now==

Madara grinned, "Good times eh Izuna?" "\_Definitely," \_Izuna replied cheerfully. Sakura looked at him, "Who's Izuna?" Madara pointed to his shoulder where Izuna's head suddenly bulged into existence, "My brother." "\_Why do they always scream?!\_" Izuna grumbled irritably as Sakura's scream rattled the cave.

\*\*=~?~\*\*

\_ Yes, Izuna is Black Zetsu, and is bonded to Madara. You see Zetsu is now Izuna's Mangekyo Jutsu, it allows him to create fresh amorphous tissue that reacts to any wound it is exposed to and heals it perfectly. However it can only heal as much as the users chakra will allow, and therefore when Izuna was dying his chakra couldn't handle his wounds because it was fading too quickly. So he transferred his remaining chakra into a large mass of Zetsu, thus creating the Black Zetsu which is in essence his new body. Izuna gave Madara his eyes and fused the Black Zetsu to Madara, rendering Madara virtually immortal barring complete and total chakra exhaustion, and allowing his body to maintain its strength even though appearance wise he has physically aged.\_

\_ After a few years Madara and Izuna decided to risk giving one of their Sharingans to Obito so that he and Rin could continue to live in the event Madara somehow died. After finding that none of them suffered any adverse effects from the transfer, they gave Rin their remaining eye in exchange for Obito's so that if anything ever happened to Obito \_\_\*\*and\*\*\_\_ Madara, Rin would be okay. Izuna's spirit turned out to be enough to maintain his Black Zetsu form without the need for their Sharingan and so Madara Obito and Rin no longer have to stick quite so close together.\_

\_ Madara was able to refine Rin's seal and remove the Forbidden Individual Curse Seal the Mist nin had placed upon her, so she is now a normal and fully matured Jinchuriki. She gets along well with Isobu the Three Tails on a level comparable to Killer B's relationship with the Eight Tails, and has along with Obito become a very formidable fighter even without calling on her powers as a Jinchuriki thanks to Madara's tutelage.\_

\_ Obito and Rin haven't returned to the Hidden Leaf Village yet because of the Uchiha Massacre, which they received word of through Kakashi via Kamui, and the resulting concern for the safety of their children. They have three, Hashirama, Minato, and Tobi.\_

\_ Yes Madara is now perhaps even more skilled than he was in his

final battle with Hashirama because he's been doing virtually nothing but refining his skills and expanding his abilities in the hundred and twenty years since, although he has added looking after the kids and being a loving grandfather to the list over the last eight years. This extensive isolation has caused him to become rather easily excited and energetic about getting to be around people or do the things he loved to do when he was younger. It has also led to the development of a frenemy relationship with Izuna as they've been in each others' heads for over a century and have had ample opportunity to get on each others' nerves, which is a fairly frequent occurrence due to Izuna's rather caustic wit and Madara's sensitive ego.\_

\_ Yes, Madara and Izuna invented the \_\_\*\*Leaf Village Secret Finger Jutsu Thousand Years of Death\*\*\_\_.\_

\_ Yes Madara did lie to Sasuke about the others still being asleep because he didn't want Sasuke running off yet as he hasn't fully recovered from having Itachi's eyes fused to his yet, and is in no shape to be up running around. Jiraiya, Kakashi and Naruto are finishing the mission while Sakura stays behind with Sasuke and Madara.\_

\_ We will be seeing Obito, Rin and their children by the Chunin Exam Finals.\_

\_\*\*ON THE NATURE OF MANGEKYOS\*\*\_

\_ In Vermillion Thunder, Mangekyo Sharingans work slightly differently than they do in canon. They only give one gift per person. The gift is always unique, and the Mangekyo is unlocked through personal trauma, not necessarily the death/murder of one's best friend. Something as simple as a broken heart can trigger it in full. The Eternal Mangekyo is obtained by fusing two Mangekyo Sharingans. If the Mangekyos of two different people are combined then the user of that Eternal Mangekyo will have the gifts of both sets of eyes. As proven here, there is also a third stage to it known as the Infinite Mangekyo, which requires the fusion of three eyes and results in the user having three gifts. I'm sure you're wondering whose eyes Itachi took to get his hands on his current Eternal Mangekyo, and the answer is that the Ameterasu was the gift of Itachi and Sasuke's mother Mikoto. \_

\_It should be noted that while the Mangekyo Sharingan does eventually degrade due to chakra burn out and the jutsu it provides are immensely draining, this is because the eyes are not naturally made to withstand that kind of chakra pressure. It's kind of like opening a few of the 8 Gates just for your eyes. That's why reinforcing the eyes by fusing them with another pair is needed to stabilize a Mangekyo Sharingan into an Eternal Mangekyo. There is also the possibility to combine one set of Mangekyo's into a single Eternal Mangekyo, eliminating the need for an outside donor, which doubles the strength of the jutsu bestowed. This is what Shisui did. Madara and Izuna's Zetsu is capable of reinforcing the Mangekyo Sharingan enough that the effect is the same as the creation of an Eternal Mangekyo without anyone losing an eye. It is also capable of rebuilding the eyes of anyone whose Mangekyo was taken, so if Mikoto were still alive, Madara would be able to restore her eyes Mangekyo and all even though Itachi had taken them out and fused them with his own.\_

\_The currently confirmed Mangekyo jutsu are as follows:\_

\_Madara: Susano'o\_

\_Izuna: Zetsu\_

\_Mikoto: Ameterasu\_

\_Itachi: Tsukuyomi\_

\_Sasuke: Chokaku-Kokoro (Hearing Mind)\_

\_Obito: Kamui\_

\_Shisui: Kotoamatsukami\_

\_Izana: Beast Eye\_

\_(:): Sage Eye\_

\_(:): Eye of Time\_

## 22. Ch18:Sannin Showdown! Tsunade vs Jiraiya

=Chapter 18-Sannin Showdown! Tsunade vs Jiraiya!=

Jiraiya, Naruto and Kakashi stopped as a figure in a green coat and hood appeared in front of them, barring their way with crossed arms. Golden eyes glared out from under the hood, "Jiraiya." Jiraiya sighed and settled into a fighting stance, "Naruto, Kakashi, get out of here. This is about to get ugly." Naruto and Kakashi looked at him and immediately took a step away from him. The green hooded figure snapped its fingers and earned a bellowed swearword from Jiraiya as a catapult erupted from beneath the path and launched him into the air.

The green clad figure leapt after him, hands folding into a hand sign and yanking a huge wooden pillar out of the ground behind them. Jiraiya flipped and bounced off the air itself with a bang, flying right at the green clad figure with a hand pulled back to strike as Naruto and Kakashi hurried to get clear. Suddenly a woman with short dark hair and a small pig in her arms fell in hurried step with them, "Hi Kakashi!"

Kakashi smiled over at her as they ran from the rapidly growing battle behind them, "Hello Shizune! How have you all been?" "Oh we've been fine," Shizune replied with a smile, "I'm really sorry we're having to run, but you know Lady Tsunade, safety first!" Kakashi smiled, "Yes, Lord Jiraiya warned me she would probably do this." Naruto stared at them, "Grandma Tsunade's here? Where?" Kakashi jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "that's her fighting your grandpa back there! You think anyone else would pick a fight with him?"

Naruto almost skidded to a halt to turn and look, but a tree crashing to the ground behind him encouraged him to keep running, "WHAT?! But why are they fighting?! They love each other!" Kakashi would've shrugged if he hadn't been running for his life, "I don't know! I don't think it really matters why, the important thing is that their

little scrap is going to demolish this entire valley and we're still in it!" "I'll tell you why when we get somewhere safe!" Shizune called. Naruto frowned, he wanted an answer now, but he wanted to stay alive more, so he kept running.

==Fifteen Minutes Later==

Naruto bent over clutching his knees, panting and watching in awe as the closest people he'd ever really had to parents demolished the valley below fighting. Shizune sat down on the edge of the ridge, "They're really going at it. I've never seen Lady Tsunade go all out before, but I guess with Lord Jiraiya she doesn't really have any choice."

Naruto looked at her, "You still haven't told me why they're fighting. Grandpa never talks about why you two left, and I never asked because it makes him sad when he thinks about Grandma, so hurry up and tell me why they're fighting already!" Shizune pulled her knees up to her chin, "You know that the Sannin imprisoned one of the Seven Great Demon Lords right?" Naruto nodded, "Yeah, everybody knows that." "Do you know which one? And how they sealed it?" Naruto shook his head, "No, Grandpa never talks about it."

Shizune smiled slightly, "I'm not surprised, I saw the battlefield, it must've been awful. The demon lord they sealed was the demon called Lust. Lady Tsunade says it was able to spread its influence like a virus, jumping from person to person by means of, well, lustful interactions," she explained with a look of mild disgust. Naruto cringed as that sank in, "Ew..." Shizune nodded as Jiraiya blew apart a massive wooden dragon Tsunade had conjured with a Rasengan the size of an oxcart, "It took all three of the Sannin to seal it, but they each had a different role to play in the sealing."

==Twenty Five Years Earlier==

Orochimaru held the two bottles that narrowly contained the Demon Lord's essence, watching sadly as Tsunade and Jiraiya shared one last kiss. "Surely there's another way," Orochimaru started, but Jiraiya shook his head, "No, there's no time. The seal is deteriorating too quickly, if we try to wait to find someone else it'll get loose and we'll have to start this whole thing over again." Tsunade gulped, "It has to have a man and a woman, and we're the only ones handy. You're too clever, if it got you there'd be no way to stop it, and I've been resisting Jiraiya for years now. Besides, we all know you're the only one smart enough to find a way to get rid of that monster for good. You can't do that if it's in your head."

Orochimaru watched in horror as his two best friends sat down back to back, the twin bottles swirling with demonic chakra in their hands, "Just get it over with," Jiraiya ordered as he scrunched his eyes to hold back the tears. Orochimaru nodded and grimly began flashing his hands through the activation sequence for the sealing ritual.

==Now==

Naruto stared at Shizune as she and Kakashi watched Tsunade and Jiraiya battle in the valley below, "So, why were they...when I was a kid they were together like nothing was wrong..." Shizune smiled,

"they took a big risk for you Naruto, they wanted to give you at least a little bit of a normal life." She sighed as Tsunade tried to knock Jiraiya from the sky with a barrage of massive wooden fists, "But they couldn't keep it up forever, and one night, one of them almost slipped. Lady Tsunade's never said which one of them it was, but if either of them ever slip the other won't be able to resist and the demon will be freed. That's their curse now, they're irresistible, but the person they want most is the one person they can never go near."

Their hair was blown back as Tsunade and Jiraiya exchanged two particularly titanic attacks, and Shizune continued, "That's why they're fighting, they have to be sure they're in control of themselves. If either of them taps into the demon's chakra during the battle, they'll know it's not safe for them to be around each other and run." Naruto stared at the tiny crimson figure that was Jiraiya flying about through the air using his Raijin Stomp jutsu, "I never knew."

==Over the Valley==

Jiraiya bounded across the sky, folding his hands into a hand sign, "Doesn't she ever get tired?" Then he activated his Needle Hell and intercepted a hailstorm of wooden needles from the immense wooden dragon Tsunade was perched on top of. As his jutsu finally petered out his transformation flickered and he looked at his suddenly unwrinkled hand, "Uh-oh..." Then his next step went through the air he'd been trying to coalesce as he threw his transformation back up and became an old man again.

He hung in the air for a moment flapping his arms, "HEEEEEELP!" he bellowed as he plummeted through the air. \_Please-don't-let-me-hit...please-don't-let-me-hit...please-Tsunade-I'm-in-control-so-don't-let-me-go-splat!\_ A hand suddenly caught his ankle and held him upside down twenty feet from the ground. Tsunade tossed him in the air and caught him under the armpits, smiling brightly as he gave her a long suffering look, "Hi Tsuna." She set him down on top of her massive wooden dragon, "I knew you'd get tired before long. You never could match me for endurance in an all out slugfest."

Jiraiya sat down to keep from falling down and Tsunade sat down next to him as the massive wooden dragon stumped across the valley, which was now largely deforested, on fire, and pitted with massive holes that would become lakes with a few good rains. Tsunade laid her head on Jiraiya's shoulder, "Was that Naruto I saw earlier?" Jiraiya nodded, "Yep." "He's gotten so big!" Tsunade said with a smile. "I haven't heard from anyone in a long time, how are Orochimaru and his kids?"

Jiraiya smiled, "They're doing well. The kids are actually up for the final round of their Chunin Exams soon, same with Naruto." Tsunade winced, "I've been away that long?" Jiraiya nodded, "Yeah. Naruto's grown up a lot, so have Orochimaru's kids." Tsunade snorted, "Orochimaru'd better get a fire lit under his ass, I'm missing too much of my kids' lives! Naruto, Temari, Kankuro, sweet little Gaara...if he doesn't come up with a cure soon I'm going to kick his ass all the way to the Land of Iron! I miss home..." she added sadly.

"And we miss you," Jiraiya told her quietly. Tsunade wiped a tear from her eye, "Why are you here Jiraiya? If Orochimaru hasn't come up with a cure yet you shouldn't be near me." "The crown prince is coming to the Chunin Exam Finals." Tsunade's head snapped up, "The Crown Prince is coming all the way out here?" Jiraiya nodded, "Sarutobi Sensei wants us all there. Orochimaru and I will be there, so will at least two more village heads, and Lord Hanzo and his son. Hanzo's the Mizukage now by the way," Tsunade stared at him, "\_WHAT?\_" Jiraiya nodded, "Appointed by the Emperor himself, and his son's in charge of Hidden Rain now. He's got a stage three Rinnegan and takes after his old man, may wind up being \_scarier\_ than his old man."

Tsunade nodded, they were close to the ridge where Naruto, Kakashi and Shizune were, "Well that certainly merits a show of power, but it doesn't merit throwing the two of us together. There's got to be more." Jiraiya nodded, "There is." Tsunade nudged him when he didn't elaborate and with one word he made her heart skip a beat, "Akatsuki."

==That Night==

Kakashi, Shizune and Naruto had all gone to bed already, now Tsunade sat next to Jiraiya in the small mountain shack she and Shizune had been living in, "Out with it Jiraiya, what's happening?" Jiraiya sat back, "The Akatsuki's only half of it, and you won't believe the other half until you see it. I saw him, \_talked\_ to him, and I'm still not sure I believe it." "What?" Tsunade snapped irritably, "Who?!" "Madara," Jiraiya replied quietly as he stared at the fire.

Tsunade stared at him, "What? He's alive?" Jiraiya nodded, "Alive and claims to be as strong as he was in his prime. He saved me, Kakashi and Naruto's whole team from two Akatsuki members the other day." Tsunade made a face, "You needed help to take down two of those punks?" Jiraiya frowned at her, "One of them was Itachi Uchiha." Tsunade nodded as understanding lit her face, "Tsukuyomi." Jiraiya nodded, "Horrible thing. His partner, Kisame Hoshigake, got Kakashi with that sword of his, completely shut down Kakashi's jutsu and left him totally vulnerable."

Tsunade exhaled through her nose, "So, what does Madara want?" "He claims he just wants to come back to the village with some Uchiha survivors he's been sheltering. Apparently Kakashi's known about him for over ten years." "And he never told anyone?" Tsunade asked in surprise. "Apparently Madara was keeping Kakashi's best friends alive, and he credits Madara with helping us win the last war behind the scenes, so I can't really fault him for keeping the old nut's secret." He sighed, "And he did save our butts from the Akatsuki. Speaking of whom, Lord Hanzo has put a proposal to Sarutobi Sensei, and I expect Orochimaru as well, for a joint strike to take the Akatsuki out once and for all."

Tsunade looked at him, "Hanzo knows where they're hiding?" Jiraiya nodded, "He was gracious enough to share that information with us, as well as everything they know about them. Sarutobi sensei wants all three of us on hand to handle this. They've gathered a small village's worth of flunkies, we're going to need all the combat power we can get." Tsunade nodded, "And nobody does that like we do." "Exactly."

Tsunade sat back and sighed, "Alright, I'll come back with you." She smiled viciously, "I'll test my ass kicking foot out on Orochimaru for not working fast enough." Jiraiya smiled, "Well be sure we have time to sell tickets." Tsunade laughed.

==The Sand Village==

Orochimaru sneezed so hard it picked him up off his feet. He rubbed his nose and looked down at his fuzzy purple slippers, "Gre-eat, Tsunade's mad again..." He took a drink of milk from his "World's Best Dad" mug and looked out at the Sand Village below, "How am I going to tell them I don't have a cure yet?"

=~?~=

\_I'll go ahead and address probably the biggest shock of this chapter for those who hadn't guessed it already, yes Orochimaru is the Kazekage and the father of Temari, Gaara and Kankuro. He is not evil like he was in canon, he is in fact a very good father and he loves his family very much. He is however still very much an experimenter and managed to give Anko Wood Release artificially (more on why later because it wasn't just "I need a guinea pig and you're probably tough enough to handle this" like he was in canon with the curse mark).\_

\_ Yes Tsunade and Jiraiya did tire themselves out in less than half an hour, this is because they were using their hugest most powerful and insanely draining jutsu, although Tsunade could have kept going for another hour or so. They could normally fight all day, and even one of the jutsu they were throwing around would've been enough to send a small army into disarray or a mass grave.\_

\_ Yes Tsunade and Jiraiya are in love, Tsunade finally fell for Jiraiya after she lost Dan. However they haven't seen each other in years because if they ever have any "lustful interactions" with each other while the Demon Lord Lust is trapped within them, it will set the demon free and be as monstrosly destructive as the Nine-Tails. They can have lustful interactions with anyone else with no problems, but they can't do so with each other.\_

\_ They were together when Naruto was little because they both came to help with the Nine Tails, but having arrived too late to save either Minato or Kushina, they took the risk of living together to raise Naruto. They were very loving parents, and very happy for a few years, but one night one of them slipped up and they almost cut the demon loose, forcing Tsunade to flee.\_

\_ She's been in hiding ever since with Shizune. Jiraiya swore he'd never come near her again unless there were an emergency or Orochimaru found a cure. There's not an emergency and Orochimaru hasn't found a cure yet, which is why Tsunade attacked Jiraiya to make sure he was still himself and hadn't succumbed to the demon.\_

\_ One benefit they have which is also in a way an additional kick in the teeth for them, is that while the Demon Lord is trapped within them, they don't age and they are irresistible to the opposite sex, this is how Jiraiya has had so much infinite game over the last few decades, he is quite literally irresistible. He maintains a transformation to appear an old man, but really he hasn't aged in thirty years. Tsunade can get away with looking that young because

Senju age at half the rate normal people do once they reach their prime, which is how the first and second Hokages lived so long.\_

\_ Also all Senju descended from the First Hokage (Senju breed like rabbits) now have Wood Release, and Tsunade's the best at it.\_

\_ Jiraiya's Raijin Stomp Jutsu lets him compact air to stand on. However he can only hold it for a moment and it makes a small explosion when he releases the compaction. Used in rapid succession it allows him to maneuver through the air as though he's bouncing across floating stepping stones.\_

\_ The Akatsuki have been around for about twenty years, and they've been a matter of concern for all shinobi villages for fifteen. They've gained enough renown that a platoon of Samurai were actually dispatched ten years ago to wipe them out. Not a single Samurai was left breathing after the battle, and after that the Akatsuki went underground, but the entire empire is still deeply concerned about them, which is why Tsunade agrees with Jiraiya that having found them is worth the risk of them being around each other.\_

### 23. Chapter 19: Return to Konoha

=Chapter 19-Return To Konoha=

==Four Days Later==

Jiraiya sighed and turned to Madara, "Okay, big guy, we need you to wait out here while we go in and prepare everyone. Sarutobi-sensei's old, he's liable to have a heart attack if we just spring you on," he frowned at the empty space where Madara had been a moment earlier, "where did he go?" Obito pointed past him towards the village as he tried not to laugh, Jiraiya whirled and saw Madara running towards the village, "I'M HOOOOOME!"

Jiraiya clasped his hands to the side of his head before taking off after Madara, "Dammit! Come on Tsuna we gotta catch him before he causes a panic!" "Too late," Kakashi commented dryly as Madara suddenly Body Flickered the last half kilometer to the village entrance, bounced over the heads of the sentries and ran off into the market. "Craaap..." Jiraiya groaned. Tsunade patted him on the shoulder, "It'll be alright Jiraiya, we just have to go tell Sarutobi-sensei what's going on. And maybe send Kakashi and the others to calm him and everyone else down," she added as the screaming started.

Naruto sighed, "I'm on it." He took off so fast it was almost as though he had teleported. Kakashi grabbed Sakura and Sasuke, "We'll go too." He promptly teleported all three of them to Madara's location and popped out through his Sharingan right in front of him. They arrived just as Naruto skidded to a halt outside. Madara frowned at them, "Do you mind?! I am trying to order here!" Naruto blinked and then laughed, "Teuchi! Can we get a bowl of ramen for the man?" Teuchi poked his head out from behind the counter, "Naruto? Why is the ghost of Madara Uchiha in my ramen stand?"

Madara groaned, "For the millionth time, I am not a ghost! I'm just really freaking old! And I want some ramen! So can I please have some ramen?!" Teuchi hurried to start preparing the ramen as Madara's

impatient face spurred him into action. Kakashi sighed, "Lord Madara, will you please stay here to avoid causing anymore commotion while I go let Lord Jiraiya and Lady Tsunade know where you are?"

Madara nodded around a mouthful of ramen, "sure!" Kakashi nodded and disappeared.

==An Instant Later==

Kakashi reappeared at the Hokage's tower next to Jiraiya and Tsunade, "Found him." Lord Third looked at him, "Who?" "We just walked in," Jiraiya told him before turning to Lord Hokage, "Sensei, I know it may sound hard to believe, but Madara Uchiha's alive." Lord Hokage blinked and then smiled, "Oh I see, you're joking. Good joke Jiraiya. Hello Tsunade, it's been a long time." Tsunade smiled back, "Yes sensei it has, but Jiraiya's not kidding, Madara's alive and he's in the village at," she looked at Kakashi who supplied, "Ichiraku Ramen."

Lord Hokage's eye twitched and then Tsunade jumped onto his desk and slammed a hand into his chest to restart his heart.

==Meanwhile==

Rin smiled at Obito, "Grandfather sure is excited isn't he?" "You think he's excited?" Obito laughed, "I'm ecstatic!" Tobi leaned over, "Daddy, what will our new house look like?" Obito smiled at his son riding on his shoulders, "It's a very big house made of metal and stone with a big tree in the middle. It's the house I lived in when I was your age." Hashirama bounced down out of the tree branches overhead a large smile on his face, "We've got a tree house?! Awesome!" Minato flashed down next to him, "Hey Hashi, race you!" "You're on!" They took off as fast as they could toward the gate.

Obito looked at Rin who smiled, "Oh fine, give me Tobi." Obito lifted Tobi off his shoulders and handed him to Rin before taking off after his older boys. Tobi looked up at Rin, "Mommy, can we run too?" Rin smiled, "Let's just walk for now okay sweetie? We don't want to shake up your little brother," Tobi smiled and laid a hand on Rin's ever so slightly distended belly, "Ok, we'll go slow for little brother."

==An Hour Later==

After taking Lord Third to Madara, Tsunade had left them to discuss his return and headed straight for the hospital. Now she strode down the hallway, several of the doctors who remembered her jumping and scraping and bowing as they saw her coming. She smiled, \_Good to be back\_, she found one of her old aides, "Mina, I need a list of all the patients we've got right now." Mina who was fifty, jumped half out of her skin, before turning, "Lady Tsunade?" Then she snapped a salute, "Yes ma'am!" and hurried off.

Tsunade grinned before looking around, \_who to scare next?\_ Then she saw a young man in green limping away from an examination room with a crutch under his good arm and his other one in a sling. Tsunade walked over, "You, hold it." The young man turned to her, "Yes ma'am?" Tsunade looked him over, "Let me see your arm." The arm was

quickly lifted, earning a slight wince from Tsunade's rather flustered patient and a hiss of pain as she took his bandaged hand gently and ran a finger up his forearm.

She nodded, "Broke it using the Eight Gates? Leg too?" Lee blinked, "Yes ma'am." Tsunade whacked him in the head, "Idiot. There are safer ways to strengthen your blows and increase your speed! Now hold still." Lee blinked the stars from his eyes as a warm feeling spread from Tsunade's glowing hand as she ran it back and forth over his arm. Tsunade kept at it for a minute and then suddenly reached down and grabbed him by the seat of his pants, lifting him off the ground and doing the same thing to his leg.

She set him down a moment later and Lee was stunned to find that his arm and leg were completely healed. He bowed as low as he could, "Thank you! I don't know who you are, but thank you so much!" Tsunade smiled, "Thank me by doing something for me." Lee snapped upright and saluted, "Yes ma'am!" Tsunade leaned in very close with a smile, "Don't use that technique again unless your life and the lives of everyone you care about are in danger or so help me if you live through it I'll break a lot more than your arm and leg."

She straightened up and patted a very pale Lee on the shoulder, "Now go on. Go make sure your arm and leg work, be gentle on them for a few weeks and have a lollipop." She handed him a lollipop and patted him on the head before walking off. Tenten walked up staring, "Lee? Did she really just heal you?" Lee nodded, "It would appear so, my arm and leg feel great!" Tenten smiled, "That's great! Now you can make the Chunin Exams Final!"

Lee smiled, "Yes!" Then he gasped, "We've gotta tell Guy-sensei!" Tenten smiled, "Yeah, and then we've got to go celebrate! Come on!" She took off almost dragging him with a huge smile.

==Across Town An Hour Later==

Jiraiya strolled along towards the hot springs with a huge grin on his face, time to indulge an old hobby. Just as he was looking for a good crack in the fence he became aware of someone hovering by his elbow. He stood up straight and looked at the beautiful young woman with her hair wrapped in a towel next to him, "Um hellooo..." he started trying to formulate an excuse when the girl asked, "Are you Lord Jiraiya Hatake?"

Jiraiya blinked and then smiled proudly, "Yes, yes I am." He suddenly found a book in front of him which he immediately recognized as a battered copy of his first book, The Tale of The Utterly Gutsy Shinobi. The young woman beamed up at him, "I'm a huge fan, will you sign my book please?" Jiraiya flipped the book open and went to sign it only to see that he already had, he frowned in confusion, "I seem to have signed it already!"

The girl smiled at him with a strange combination of shyness and sadness, "Yes, it was my mother's book. It's all I've got left of her, it would mean a lot to me if you'd sign it again." Jiraiya blinked and then smiled gently, "Of course I will. I didn't realize that. Let's see," He sat down with his back to the wall and fished out a pen. She sat down next to him and he smile at her, "Who should I make this out to?"

She gave him a dazzling smile, "Sokushi Misutsuyu." Jiraiya's hand froze halfway to the page, but Sokushi didn't notice because Kita poked her head out of the baths, "Sokushi you forgot to return your towel!" Sokushi's hand flew to the towel around her hair, "Oh right, sorry!" She quickly whipped it off her head and ran to return it. When she returned Jiraiya was very pale. She sat down next to him, "Are you alright Lord Jiraiya?" Jiraiya took a deep but unsteady breath, "Sokushi, can I ask you when your birthday is?"

"November fourteenth," Sokushi replied, slightly puzzled by the question, and even more puzzled by Jiraiya's flinch. Then Jiraiya asked, "Ok, two more questions, first are you sixteen?" Sokushi blinked in confusion and confirmed that she was, then Jiraiya said quietly, "I don't suppose you could tell me your father's name could you?" Sokushi flinched, "I'm an orphan. Nobody knows who my dad was. My mom died before she could tell anyone at the orphanage."

Jiraiya flinched like she had punched him, "Orphanage?" Sokushi nodded, "Yes, I just told you I'm an orphan! Orphans live in orphanages!" Jiraiya nodded and rose, "Come on. There's something I need to check." Sokushi got up to follow him, "What is it?" Jiraiya shuddered, "Paternity test. Tsunade's gonna kill me." It took a second for that to sink in and then Sokushi only narrowly managed not to faint, "KIIITAAA!" Kita skidded out of the baths and stopped dead in her tracks as she got a good look at Sokushi and Jiraiya side by side, "Oh, \_damn!\_"

==Half An Hour Later==

"JIRAIYA YOU PERVERTED LECHEROUS OLD COOT!" Tsunade bellowed as she saw Sokushi. Jiraiya just barely managed not to run for cover, "Now Tsuna, we haven't confirmed anything yet..." "\_Confirmed it?!\_" Tsunade bellowed as she caught a backpedaling Jiraiya by the front of his shirt, "She looks exactly like you at that age except petite and pretty! I don't need a paternity test, I've never seen a child look that much like their parent!" Sokushi caught Tsunade's arm as she pulled back to deck Jiraiya, "Lady Tsunade please!"

Tsunade turned a glare on Sokushi and instantly deflated as she saw the look on Sokushi's face. She promptly dropped Jiraiya and laid a hand on Sokushi's shoulder with a gentle smile, "I'm sorry, this caught me off guard. Come on, let's go draw some blood and make sure." Kita raised a hand, "I'm coming too!" Tsunade looked at her and Kita's chest swelled a little with defiance, "Sokushi is my best friend, I am coming with you."

Tsunade nodded, a smile of approval twitching across her face, "Alright, you come too." She turned and barked as Shizune came around a corner, "Shizune! Get me some of Jiraiya's blood, I don't care how you take it out of him but make it hurt!" Shizune snapped a startled salute, "Yes ma'am!"

A few moments later Sokushi found herself in an examination room trying very hard not to think about the needle Tsunade was about to stick in her arm. Tsunade smiled at her, "Even if this comes back negative, Jiraiya will probably want to adopt you. You're so much like him I'll be surprised if this comes back anything less than 100% positive." Sokushi looked at her and saw she was sitting back smiling at her as she put away the needle, a vial of blood already ready to check. Sokushi blinked, \_Wow, she's good...\_ "You really think

so?"

Tsunade nodded, "He hates needles too. You have his hair, eyes, skin tone, and his chakra's only the faintest hair different from yours." "And apparently you have similar taste in literature," Kita added from where she was propped. Tsunade took a second to process that and then raised an eyebrow at what she had thought to be a sweet innocent girl, "really now?" Sokushi blushed, "My mother was a fan and one of her books is my only memento of her. It was Lord Jiraiya's first book and I've read it a million times. Yes it's grown on me. I've read some of his other work and if you can get past the gratuitous sex scenes it's actually extremely deep and sweet!"

Tsunade blinked and then started laughing, "Oh child, you even sound like him!" Sokushi blushed with a smile and Tsunade was still chuckling a few minutes later when Shizune opened the door and handed her a vial of Jiraiya's blood. "Lord Jiraiya's passed out in the lobby," Shizune said with a smile. "I didn't want you to hurt him that much!" Tsunade exclaimed, "How much blood did you draw?" Shizune pointed at the vial in her hand, "Just this. Lord Jiraiya squirmed so much I had to knock him out."

"Oh well that's fine then," Tsunade smiled as she accepted the vial and turned to a microscope, "Go fetch Mina, I want to check this with a Byakugan too." Shizune nodded, "Yes ma'am." Tsunade bent her eye to the microscope and her breath caught, "Sokushi, you're a toad sage?" Sokushi blinked, "Yes ma'am." Tsunade sat up and looked over her shoulder, "Well I'll keep going, but that's enough proof for me. Did you send yourself to Mount Myoboku by mistake trying to summon a toad?" Sokushi blinked, "yes but how did you..." Tsunade laughed as she turned back to the microscope, "Even more proof! Jiraiya did the exact same thing."

Sokushi smiled up at Kita who smiled back. Tsunade sat up and spun, "Well, looks like a match to me, but Mina will be able to make absolutely sure." Sokushi almost squealed with delight.

==Several Minutes Later==

Jiraiya found himself being shook awake. Tsunade was holding a report in front of his nose, "Perfect. Match." Jiraiya hung his head, "I know." Tsunade yanked him to his feet and slammed him into the wall, sticking a finger to his chest, "And now you are going to go make up the sixteen years you've missed to that poor sweet little girl. Got it?" "I would've done that even if you hadn't told me to," Jiraiya grumbled. "Don't you get smart with me Jiraiya," Tsunade growled, "I haven't touched anyone in thirty years for you, and you go and have a daughter with someone else?! I am NOT amused!"

She dropped him and turned to storm off, but Jiraiya caught her shoulder, "Tsunade, she needs a mother too." Tsunade stopped, "She does," she agreed quietly. She sighed, "When's Orochimaru getting here? He may be able to make more headway with the two of us on hand to study." A figure in black appeared next to them in a puff of smoke and was promptly slugged out of the building through a wall, "DAMN IT OROCHIMARU HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU NOT TO SNEAK UP ON ME?!" Tsunade barked.

Kita leaned over to Sokushi, "Your new mom is scary." Sokushi nodded with a smile, still slightly light headed, "Yeah. She's still cool

though."

Outside Orochimaru wheezed as he sat up, "I thought people went to hospitals to get better! Ow..."

==That Night==

Lord Third looked around at the clan heads of the Hidden Leaf, thirteen for the first time in ten years, and Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru in attendance as well along with the seconds of everyone present. Lord Third rose, "My friends, we are gathered tonight to address the return of someone we thought long dead," he gestured to Madara, "Lord Madara Uchiha, and his brother Izuna." Izuna's head bubbled out of Madara's shoulder upon being mentioned, and for once nobody screamed, although he did get a few looks of surprise as Lord Third continued, "And with them they have brought two students of the Fourth Hokage, thought long dead."

He turned to Madara, "Lords Madara and Izuna, would you care to explain your absence?" Madara nodded and rose, "Thank you Lord Hokage." He looked around, "I left after my final battle with Hashirama at the urging of my brother Izuna, who has always been the more logical of us. He pointed out to me that while my rivalry with Hashirama was based on genuine differences of opinion, Hashirama had been elected Hokage, and needed to be allowed to command as such. I knew I would not be able to resist clashing with him, as I always had, but Hashirama was my friend, and I could not continue to call him my friend if I were the one undermining his authority at every turn. To preserve my friendship with Hashirama, I faked my death in our final battle. Hashirama knew I was alive, but upon hearing my reasoning he agreed that it was best for me to leave."

He sighed, "I regret my rivalry with him now, but it can no longer be helped. I have returned to the Village Hidden in the Leaves because I have been gone too long. I have not been upholding my duties to my village and my clan as I should. I have returned to uphold my duties once again, to this village and to what is left of my clan." He sighed, "I know that I have done wrong, and I will accept whatever punishment you deem fit honorable clan heads, but know that even death will not pain me as greatly as what my foolish pride and I have allowed to happen in my absence."

"You speak of the tragedy that befell the Uchiha," Tanto Shimura said quietly. Madara bowed his head, "Yes." Tanto sighed, "You have my sincerest apologies, and I will shoulder equal blame for it." Madara looked at him as he continued, "Danzo was my brother, I should have seen what he was planning, what he was doing in Root, but I am ashamed to say I did not. So if Lord Madara is to be blamed for what happened in his absence, then I will accept equal blame." Madara blinked and nodded solemnly but thought to Izuna, \_Wow, they're taking this really well.\_

Then Orochimaru sighed, "If anyone is to blame it is me." Everyone looked at him as he touched his eye patch and tears leaked from beneath it, "Shisui warned me that night what Danzo was going to do, but instead of running to the Uchiha District, I ran to Root hoping to head his assault party off." Orochimaru's face twisted with anguish, "Now not only Shisui, but Izana and all the Uchiha are dead except Sasuke and those that were in hiding with you because I thought I could stop them myself rather than running to warn the

Uchiha."

Tensai Fukusei patted Orochimaru on the shoulder, "Don't give yourself too much credit Lord Orochimaru, we're all to blame. What of us Fukusei? We are the ones who are supposed to know every secret in the Village, but we did not know what horrors were growing in Root." Next to Lord Third, Madarama Senju, the now ancient eldest son of Hashirama nodded his head, "It is true what Lord Fukusei says. We all bear a heavier blame for what befell our friends the Uchiha far more than Lord Madara. My father would not let you bear the blame for this Lord Madara, nor will I." Madara blinked and looked across at him in surprise as recognition lit his face, "Little Madarama? Is that you?"

Madarama nodded with a faint smile, "Yes Godfather, it's me." Madara chuckled, "I can't believe you've grown up so much. You still have Hashirama's smile though. Thank you Madarama, it's almost like seeing my old friend again." Everyone in the room suddenly stiffened and looked around as a warm wild wind suddenly exploded from every direction, whipping the smoke from the fire pit in the center of the room into a column. A sudden shower of red flowers drifted down from somewhere in the ceiling and settled for a moment upon the head of a figure in the center of the smoke from the fire pit.

Madara stared in shock along with everyone else as Hashirama's ghost smiled at his old friend, "Welcome home," the wind whispered. Hashirama lifted the flowers that formed his ghostly hat off and tossed it to Madara, who caught it, still stunned as Hashirama waved at his descendants and disappeared in a small cyclone of smoke, a warm chuckle on the fading wind still playing about the room.

For many long minutes there was stunned silence, and then Madara collapsed to his knees laughing as tears streamed down his face while he hugged the somehow now a solid hat to his chest, "I'm home," he whispered as Tsunade leapt around the ring restarting the hearts of the older council members as quickly as she could.

## 24. Chapter 20: Elsewhen Elsewhere and Later

=Chapter 20-Elsewhen, Elsewhere and Later=

==Ten Years Earlier==

Orochimaru staggered back under the weight of his former student Shisui collapsing into him. Orochimaru had been on enough battlefields that as he caught Shisui he knew instantly that the warm wetness around Shisui's torso was a lethal amount of blood. "Sensei," Shisui coughed, "Gotta move fast. Danzo's sending Root to wipe out the Uchiha clan \_tonight\_." Orochimaru set Shisui down and quickly examined the wound as he spoke and prepared to administer first aid, "How many?"

"Not enough to beat you, not enough to beat me," Shisui mumbled as his strength faded, "Sorry Sensei, Itachi got the drop on me." Orochimaru nodded, "It's alright, don't blame yourself, we're going to get you through this and make them sorry." Shisui caught Orochimaru's robe with a bloody hand, "There's no time sensei! They're moving \_now! \_Go! I'll hold on until you get back."

Orochimaru nodded and was gone in an instant. Shisui chuckled weakly as he began working on himself, his medical jutsu weak with his chakra fading, but hopefully strong enough, "Now they're gonna get it..." He chuckled weakly as his single Eternal Mangekyo, the first of its kind, closed, maybe for the last time.

Orochimaru didn't waste any time, flashing across the village in an instant and within two minutes he was smashing down the door to the fortress beneath the village that was Root. He launched through the doorway and latched onto the first person he saw with lethally toxic fangs. Before any of the other Root sentinels could move, "Shuriken Shadow Clone Jutsu!" They were all cut down in a hailstorm of blades.

Before the near indestructible titanium siege doors could swing close Orochimaru launched through them in half snake form, whirling as he flew and unleashing another hurricane of shuriken into the guards. He landed on his hands and flipped, bringing his massive tail around and wrapping it around the head of the gargantuan he-wasn't-quite-sure-what-that-was being led out to fight him. A quick movement later there was a loud pop and the behemoth slumped to its knees as Orochimaru resumed human form and sprang for the control room.

He clung effortlessly to the steel and in less than a minute undid the seal that made the windows virtually indestructible, knocking the nearest one out with a furious elbow strike before slithering through the hole, wishing for just an instant he had a Sharingan as a dozen shinobi hurled kunai at him simultaneously. He disappeared for an instant and the kunai passed through the space where he had been, he grinned internally as he cut Danzo's bodyguards down from behind with a single swing of his Kusanagi sword, "nah, I'm good."

He spun as he heard the steel door to Danzo's safe room clang shut. He banged on the door, "DANZO00!" Danzo's voice echoed out of a speaker, "You're too late Orochimaru, the strike party left before you got here. We knew Shisui would, what, what's going on?! What are you doing Orochimaru?! I'm acting for the good of the Village!" Orochimaru pushed the intercom button, "You are wiping out nearly a tenth of the village, that by its very definition is not good for the village. Don't worry though, you won't live to see the magnitude of your mistake. \_Get him.\_" He ordered the carpet of cobras he had summoned inside the so called "safe room."

Danzo screamed as the intercom cut off and Orochimaru turned back to the siege doors, "Now how to get past those..." A small black and white bird that looked like the result of a Beast Scroll technique suddenly fluttered up to the broken window and a voice spoke through it, "Thank you, the emergency exit's above you." Orochimaru looked up and grinned as he saw cleverly concealed hatch, "Thank you." He sent a small snake up to investigate and upon learning the little bird spoke the truth he made a mental note to find out who had sent the bird before climbing up the chute as quickly as he could.

==Meanwhile==

Izana gasped suddenly and almost collapsed. As Anko caught her best friend, Izana's breath caught, "ITACHI YOU BASTARD!" She was suddenly

knocked from Anko's arms and slammed to the ground as Itachi landed on top of her and drove his sword through her chest with a cheerful, "You too. Byebye." The shadow clone disappeared as Anko stabbed it with a kunai and quickly knelt to start medical treatment on Izana, "Hold on Iz, hold on..." Izana coughed, "Anko listen to me! Itachi's not alone and he wasn't just here to kill me!"

Anko picked her partially upright, "What?" Izana hissed as pain flared in her torso, "They've linked the minds of everybody in the Uchiha clan! Itachi's hiding somewhere finishing the genjutsu, once he does it'll leave everyone caught in it permanently comatose unless he releases it! They're going to slaughter everyone while they're unconscious! We'll survive the genjutsu but not decapitation! You have to stop them! I'll be alright, GO!"

Anko nodded, no time for crying. She rose and rushed through the streets as Root operatives started dropping from the rooftops, "Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

==At The Ninja Academy==

Kakashi had volunteered to stay late and watch the two children who were staying late training or in Sakura's case watching Sasuke train. He had taken up a watch post on the porch and dozed off after a while with his favorite book in his hand and the colorful hat he wore to amuse the children over his eyes.

Now he sat bolt upright as Sasuke suddenly howled in agony and collapsed. Kakashi ran to him as a tiny pink haired figure and another who looked so much like Minato-sensei it hurt came running to see what was wrong. He knelt over the writhing boy, "Release!" Just as Sasuke stilled, Kakashi heard explosions. He rose, "Naruto! Sakura! Watch Sasuke!" An instant and a puff of smoke later he was gone, two very stunned kids watching him go.

==A Few Moments Later==

Anko rushed through the streets of the Uchiha district, lashing out with her deadliest jutsu at everything wearing a Root uniform. "Get out of there!" She yelled as a Root operative kicked in a door only to be grabbed by the fangs of half a dozen poisonous snakes and hurled across the street. "Leave that kid alone!" She yelled as she hurled a wooden shuriken at another Root operative standing over a fallen child. As the shuriken connected it exploded into a small tree, roots immediately burrowing through the Root operatives body and sending them to the ground howling in agony for almost a full minute. By the time the roots stopped the Root operatives heart, Anko was already gone again.

She leapt and wrapped around a black clad figure, cutting their throat and hurling the quickly dying figure into one of its friends before throwing a Cutting Sprig at them. A house suddenly exploded at the end of the street and she ran, "Please don't be too late, please don't be too late, please don't be too late..." The house collapsed just as she was almost to it and a voice spoke from behind her, "Thought that might get your attention."

Anko spun and saw Foo Yamanaka and Torune Aburame, Itachi's partners, behind her along with a dozen more Root operatives around her. Foo leveled a cold gaze at her, "Why are you fighting us? We're doing

this for the good of the village." "\_Bullshit!\_" Anko snapped, "Killing these people is the exact opposite of good for the village!" "Told you she wouldn't listen," Torune grumbled. Foo sighed, "Yeah, you did. Guess we'll just have to kill her."

"Not likely!" Kakashi bellowed as he leapt from the roof behind them, both hands blazing with his Lightning Cutter as he swiped them through Foo and Torune's heads. Foo disappeared in a puff of smoke and reappeared behind Kakashi moving quickly to stab him in the back only for one of Anko's snakes to clamp onto his leg and sling him into the burning wreckage of the building they had baited her with as she leapt and spun, driving a kunai into the chest of another Root operative before flicking the blade into the eye of another one.

"By the way!" Kakashi called over the chaos, "If we live through this, would you like to go out some time?" Anko spared him a half second glance before snapping the neck of a Root operative that was trying to get the drop on her before turning back to him, "You think of the weirdest things in a fight!" Kakashi pointed two fingers at her and a blast of lightning chakra shot past her head.

Anko whirled as she heard a choked gurgle and saw that Kakashi had just shot the guy who was about to stab her in the back out of the air. Kakashi grabbed a Root operative running up from behind him without looking and cut his throat before shrugging at Anko, "Actually I've been meaning to ask for a while, I just haven't really done it yet." He spun and hurled the body in his hand into another Root operative before casting a smile over his shoulder at her, "I'm a lot braver in battle."

Anko blinked and then smiled, "We'll see. Come on, let's make sure there aren't any more of these bastards." Kakashi threw her a casual off handed salute, "Yes ma'am!"

They searched the entire Uchiha District but didn't find any more Root operatives until they found the massive piles of bodies around Orochimaru and Izana. Izana was on the ground with blood leaking from the corners of her mouth, her bloody katana on the ground next to her as Orochimaru desperately checked for a pulse. Anko slumped to her knees next to Izana, "Iz..."

Suddenly a small voice spoke, "She's not dead." Kakashi turned and saw a little boy with paper white skin and black hair standing at the edge of the square. "Her chakra's just slowed down." Orochimaru looked at the boy then his heart suddenly skipped a beat as Izana's gave just the faintest pulse. He stared as the boy continued, "She slowed down her body so that it could heal." Orochimaru looked back at the boy, "Child, how do you know that?"

The boy shrugged, "I could see the jutsu hovering in front of her eyes while she was fighting. That sword wound looked nasty, and you didn't have enough time to heal her fully, so I'm sure she must've been planning to use it the whole time she was fighting. It's really simple. I could tell you how to wake her up if you want, but she'll die if the healing doesn't finish, and I don't know what medical jutsu would do in this state."

The boy walked closer, "I've never seen a Mangekyo Jutsu that simple. Agent Uchiha and Mister Shisui had much more complicated Mangekyos. Is Mister Shisui okay? He was injured when he got away from Master

Danzo." Orochimaru's head snapped up, "Oh no, Shisui!" He straightened immediately, "Child are you certain Izana will be okay?" The boy nodded, "Yes, she will be fine. Agent Uchiha's genjutsu didn't get her." Orochimaru disappeared.

Kakashi knelt down next to the boy, "Who are you child? Where are your parents?" The boy looked up at him, "Master Danzo and the instructors never gave me a name, they just sighed at me. Mister Shisui said my name might be Sai, but I don't think he believed me about the sighing thing, so he might have been joking. May I see your hat? It has a pleasant combination of colors and the pattern interests me." Kakashi took off his hat and handed it to Sai before exchanging a horrified glance with Anko.

Orochimaru surged back into his house and found Shisui right where he had left him. He knelt and hurriedly started checking Shisui's vitals. Shisui was very pale as he asked, "Sensei, is Izana alright? And the others?" Orochimaru quickly set to work trying to heal Shisui's wounds although his logical mind told him there was far too large a pool of blood around Shisui for him to survive only for Orochimaru's emotional half to snap back at it to shut up, "They're fine, Izana's unconscious and I think the kid said something about Itachi having put the others in a genjutsu, but Izana was certain it wouldn't kill them."

Shisui's eye widened, "kid, you mean Sai? Is he okay?!" Orochimaru didn't take his eyes off the wound, "I don't know, he didn't tell us his name, but he said he could see Mangekyo Jutsus. Yes he showed up after the battle was over." Shisui relaxed, "Good he's alright. I don't know what they did to that kid sensei, but he's not normal. No emotion, ever. I've never seen him smile except one time when I asked him if he knew how."

He weakly flapped a hand as Orochimaru raised up and tried to make a handsign, "Don't waste your energy sensei, there's nothing that can be done. I've killed enough people to know how much blood lost is too much, and that," he glanced at the huge red puddle around him, "Is way too much. I've numbed the pain, but that's all that can be done for me now." Orochimaru tried to protest, but Shisui frowned at him, "Look me in the eye and tell me I'm wrong." Orochimaru tried but couldn't lift his gaze to meet his student's, "I'm sorry Shisui."

Shisui grimaced, "Sensei, I want you to do something for me." Orochimaru nodded, "Anything." Shisui chuckled weakly, "I was hoping you'd say that, but you're not going to like it." Orochimaru looked at him warily as he weakly raised a hand to his eye, "I'll never see my family again, and I'm getting tunnel vision so I probably won't see the Village again, but you can take my eye and see all the things I'll never get to, and use it to protect my family and the Village. Please Sensei, take my eye and do what I won't be able to."

Orochimaru flinched and then nodded, "Alright. I'll do it." Shisui smiled and then the light faded from his eyes as his heart finally slowed to a stop.

==Present, A Bar In The Market District==

Tenten staggered into the alley next to the bar to throw up. She

collapsed to her knees as her wobbly legs finally went totally limp and she emptied the contents of her stomach onto the dirty concrete in front of her. Through the drunken haze clouding her mind she internally cursed herself for not knowing her limit and drinking past the capacity of her seal. She had never been able to hold alcohol down, but she had made a seal to help her keep it down years ago so that she could party. Now she regretted it as another blast of vomit splattered the ground.

She panted and rested her head on her arms, too sick to straighten up as her pulse thundered in her ears. Then her pulse went crazy as a voice behind her laughed, "Look at this boys! A nice ass stuck up in the air for us!" Tenten scrambled to her feet and turned to see three drunks behind her, all big, and all looking at her like dinner. Tenten opened her mouth to tell them to back off but that just induced another round of vomiting that doubled her up as the three drunken thugs advanced, "No..." she groaned, "Please just, just leave me alone!"

The biggest of the thugs laughed and then cried out in surprise as he suddenly disappeared. There was a crash from across the street as he landed and then another one of the thugs was slammed into the wall before being knocked halfway to the top of it by a tremendous uppercut and slumping to the ground unconscious with several broken teeth and a shattered jaw. The third one backed up quickly, "Hey man, take it easy! We was just jokin! We didn't know she was your girlfriend!" "She is not my girlfriend," Lee snarled, "But nobody is hurting a lady in front of me." "So why not turn arou-" the thug didn't finish his liquor sodden question because Lee launched forward and launched him across the street with a massive kick.

Lee flipped back to the one he had knocked out and hurled him after the other two. Half the people in the bar had heard the commotion and were outside staring as Lee stalked across the street toward the three thugs. He lifted the only one still conscious like he didn't weigh a thing and snarled, "If I \_ever\_ catch any of you assaulting an innocent woman again, you will wish I had beaten you to death." He dropped the whimpering brute and pointed down the street, "Now take those two and get out-" he was going to say, "of my sight." But the thug took his pointing at the gate to mean "Get out of the village" and took off running as fast as he could before Lee could finish, dragging his friends behind him.

Lee blinked after them, "Well that is not quite what I meant, but it will do I suppose." Shino suddenly yelled from the door of the bar, "\_WHOOO!\_ GO LEE!" Everyone applauded and there were several people who wanted to buy him drinks but Lee politely refused on the grounds of having a strict rule against drinking in public, "If you will all excuse me, my friend is sick and needs to go home." Before anyone could say anything Lee had run, scooped Tenten up in a bridal carry and sprung to the rooftops before anyone could see her face.

Tenten put a hand over her mouth as her cheeks bulged, "Lee please, a little bit less jumping around." Lee nodded and slowed to a slow calm walk, making sure to jostle her as little as possible, "Are you alright Tenten?" Tenten shook her head and scrunched her eyes shut as the tears started, "No. I'm drunk and sick, and a big fat idiot," she sobbed, "and what kind of kunoichi can't hold off a pack of thugs like those losers?!"

Lee lifted her head to his and hugged her as best he could without dropping her, "You are drunk, and you are sick, but you are not big, nor are you by any means fat. You are a very beautiful and skilled kunoichi, and I am proud to call you my teammate. There are far worse flaws than drinking too much, and it is nothing when compared to how wonderful you are." Tenten smiled and rested her head on his shoulder, "You really mean that don't you?" Lee nodded, "Of course! It is the truth!" Tenten smiled and cuddled a little bit closer to him.

==Later That Evening==

"What is it you wished to show me Lords Hokage and Kazekage?" Madara asked as they walked through the quiet halls of Root. "Well you see," Lord Third said, "We weren't quite telling the whole truth earlier." Madara looked at him, "What?" "My student Shisui Uchiha is indeed dead," Orochimaru said quietly, "I wasn't able to save him from the wounds he received at Itachi's hands, but my other student Izana Uchiha used her Mangekyo Jutsu to place herself into a healing coma. By our calculations she'll wake up any day now." He opened a large steel door and Madara stared, "And just like she predicted, the genjutsu itself hasn't killed a soul yet."

Orochimaru gestured to the long rows of beds full of unconscious Uchihas hooked up to monitors, "Unfortunately we haven't been able to break the hold of whatever this is." Madara walked over to one of his descendants and touched their shoulder in awe as Orochimaru continued, "We're not sure what it is, but Izana was certain it was the Tsukuyomi, so we think it must be a variation of that. We had hoped we could beat a counter jutsu out of Itachi if we ever caught him, but now that he's dead the secrets of the Tsukuyomi have died with him."

Madara's head rose and a smile twitched across his face. Orochimaru and Lord Third stared as he started laughing, "I think he's cracked," Orochimaru whispered to Lord Third who nodded in agreement. Then Madara turned beaming at them, "No they haven't. They're alive and well in the eyes of Sasuke!" As Orochimaru and Lord Third stared Madara threw his hands to the sky and laughed, "My clan can be saved!"

==Tenten's Apartment==

Tenten laid a hand on Lee's chest and raised up a little, "I think I'm okay to move now, I'm going to go take a shower." She sat up, "Don't leave, I need you here in case I fall." Lee nodded and when she stepped out of the shower and poked her head out the door twenty minutes later, he hadn't moved from his spot on the couch where she had left him. She smiled cheerfully and quickly got dressed before going out and lying down on the couch next to him wrapped in a robe. She laid her head on his shoulder and he tentatively wrapped an arm around her.

She cuddled up a little bit closer to him, "You know Lee, if anyone saw us like this, with me dressed like this, they might think, things." Lee went to spring up and Tenten pulled him back down with a grin, "Hey I didn't say you could leave yet!" She pulled him over on top of her and wrapped her legs around him as her robe fell open and Lee exclaimed, "Tenten! Where are your clothes?!" Tenten grinned, "Lingerie is clothes!" She laughed as she pulled him into a kiss,

"It's just extra sexy clothes!" Then she managed to twist them both around so that she was straddling him and then she leaned down and looked him in the eye, "I said I needed you here if I fell. I didn't tell you that I was falling," she kissed him gently, "for you." Lee blinked in confusion, and she sat up before draping her robe over his eyes and leaning down to whisper in his ear, "I'm going to go hop in the bed now, and if you're not right behind me, I'll never forgive you for breaking my heart."

Lee sat up a moment after she hopped off him and looked after her, his jaw hanging open as the robe fell off his head, then he nodded with a smile, "Yes ma'am!"

\*\*AN:\*\* For those wondering how Izana was able to throw off the Tsukuyomi, she has more experience with Itachi than just about anyone in the world, and is very familiar with his jutsu. More details on their relationship will have to wait until she wakes up though.\_

\_For any NejiTen shippers who don't like the LeeTen pairing, go read my other story "Four Gates to Chaos" because it actually does have your ship, along with Samurai Neji and Lady Tenten. There's a plethora of other reasons to read that one, but I know NejiTen is a popular ship, so for anyone who wants to read a story with it, there you go. I do hope you will keep reading Vermillion Thunder as well though! \_

\_Yes, the Uchiha are secretly alive. No, Sasuke doesn't know because it would've been suspicious if he weren't extremely vengeful about it. Also, it's as pleasant a surprise for him when he finds out as it was for Madara.\_

## 25. Chapter 21: Surprises

=Chapter 21-Surprises=

==The Next Day==

Neji and Guy were at their usual training spot waiting for Lee and Tenten. Neji had a fierce hangover and wasn't feeling great as he sat on top of the sawed off tree Lee used for a punching bag, but thankfully Guy was keeping it down, alternating one handed pushups and spinning kicks thrown from handstands. "They're late," Neji grumbled. Guy spun back to his feet, "One hundred!" He looked off into the distance, "I know. Those two are never late. I'm starting to worry. Check around and see if you can spot them."

Neji frowned and focused through his throbbing headache, "Byakugan." He didn't take long to spot them and when he did, he almost fell off the stump, "HOLY-" "What?! What is it?!" Guy asked, a strong note of worry in his voice, "Are they alright?! Has something happened?!" Neji flopped back on top of the stump and crossed his arms fuming as he closed his eyes, "Oh they're just fine! Don't be surprised if they take a while longer. They're not out of bed yet."

Guy put his hands on hips, "WHAT?! It's almost noon! They can't be lazing about this close to the Chunin Exam Finals!" He started to walk off, "I'll go get them. Lying about at this hour...they ought to be ashamed of themselves!" "I wouldn't do that if I were you," Neji

told him. "Why not?!" Guy called over his shoulder irritably. "It's the same bed," Neji replied bluntly. It took about five steps for Guy to realize what Neji had said. He stopped cold in his tracks, "You mean...?" "Yeah," Neji sighed as he rubbed his eyes, "I can't believe Lee got laid before I did." Guy hung his head with tears welling in his eyes, "Me too..."

"THAT'S NOT FUNNY!" He barked as Neji exploded with laughter.

==An Hour And A Half Later==

Kakashi looked at a clock, "Hmm, Guy's late. He's never late." Anko looked at the clock, "He is isn't he?" Kurenai frowned, "Should we start without them?" Asuma looked down from the branch he was propped in, "Rules say we're supposed to address all the candidates at once." "Rules also say that when you're supposed to be somewhere you should be there," Kurenai grumbled irritably.

Team Guy suddenly ran up from the direction opposite the direction they had been expected from. Guy didn't look pleased to be late, Neji didn't look pleased to have had to run, Lee's hair was standing up in spikes all over his head instead of his standard bowl, and Tenten looked like she had just woken up, having not even put her hair up yet, although it did look very good down. "Sorry we're late," Guy told the other Jonin as Asuma leapt down from his tree, "We were, held up."

Shino put it together first. He walked over to Lee and shook his hand enthusiastically with a big smile, "Congratulations!" Everyone looked at him and then realized Lee and Tenten were both blushing crimson. Kakashi looked over at Guy and blinked as everyone else realized why Lee and Tenten's squad had been late. Guy frowned irritably, "Not one word Kakashi." Kakashi shrugged and turned back to the group, before looking over at Asuma. Asuma sighed, "Dammit, forgot I'm the oldest...Okay."

He stepped forward, "Alright everybody stop congratulating the new lovebirds and listen up." He lit a cigarette and looked at them, "As you are all aware, the Chunin Exam Finals are being held in three weeks. This means that most likely at least some of you will be advancing to Chunin in less than a month. What you probably weren't aware of, is that Chunin don't serve on the same teams as genin except in war time."

There were a few expressions of surprise and a "What?" or two. "Settle down," Asuma ordered, "Once you pass your Chunin Exams you will be C-Rank Chunin, meaning you will be eligible for your specialization designation. Once you have received your designation, you will be assigned to a new Jonin instructor who is especially skilled in your designated specialty. The Specialty Instructors switch around a lot so that there is always a good variety of what's being taught, and normally they are not picked until after the exams since that's when we find out who needs what kind of instruction. However, Lord Hokage has already chosen one instructor based on the performance you all gave during the preliminaries." He gestured to Anko, "I'm sure you're all familiar with Anko, so I'll let her take it from here."

Anko stepped forward, "Gee thanks Asuma," She took a deep breath, "I've introduced myself to all of you already as the proctor of the

Second Exam, but I haven't told you much about myself. Since I don't know which of you I'll be teaching, I'll just tell you all. My specialty is Heavy Combat, specifically Anti-personnel work. Anti-personnel specialists are the ones that are called in when there is a large number of enemies in severe need of a dirt nap. We're the ones that give it to them."

"Lord Hokage has determined that many of you have potential to be Anti-personnel specialists," Anko continued, "Those of you who are placed in Anti-personnel training are going to be trained to be not just killers as all shinobi must be, but butchers. You're going to bathe in the blood of your enemies, and you're going to have to live with the fact that you will be doing so almost every time you receive an assignment. It's not an easy specialty, in some ways it's one of the hardest, but it is one that is necessary for the village to remain a viable military force." She sighed, "We're Jonin, we've all proven ourselves at least capable of such mass execution, so if you have any questions about it, ask your current instructor."

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder at Kakashi, Asuma and Kurenai, "Asuma, Kakashi and Kurenai here are also highly qualified to teach infiltration and assassination, another common specialty. In fact Asuma's already trained one team like that. So Asuma, tell em about Infiltration and Assassination." She stepped back and Asuma stepped back forward with a sigh, "Infiltration and Assassination specialists usually have a much lower body count than Anti-personnel specialists, but the risk is just as high."

"If you are put into Infiltration and Assassination, you will sometimes be called upon to go undercover, sometimes even deep cover missions that can last months or even years at a time." Asuma stated bluntly, "Anti-personnel specialists are the village's katana, Infiltration and Assassination specialists are the daggers in the backs of our enemies. If your cover is blown on a mission, you will sometimes have to fight your way out, and sometimes you will have to stay and endure torture to deceive the enemy so that larger operations can succeed." His expression darkened, "You may have to do things that will be so far outside of your comfort zone you may never feel clean again. It has happened before, that shinobi have had to execute those they came to view as friends while in deep cover. Kunoichi have married warlords and kept up the guise of humble and loving wife for years before receiving the order to execute their husband."

Some of the girls couldn't help but notice Kurenai's expression as she looked at the ground and crossed her arms, almost like she wanted to hug herself to ward off a horrid memory as Asuma continued, "They do it and come back to the village like it never happened. They know that if they don't a blunter approach will be swiftly and remorselessly employed to terminate the target. In this way it can easily be the most difficult of any shinobi specialty." He sighed, "The easiest mission you can ask for with that specialty is to sneak in, find an important piece of information or kill somebody, and sneak back out unnoticed. Thankfully most missions are like that, quick and simple, but if you are designated for Infiltration and Assassination, you will have to prepare yourself for the day when you are given a mission that may break you."

"Well, aren't we gloomy today?" A voice suddenly asked good naturedly. Everyone stopped and tried to locate the source of the

voice and then it continued, "Mind if I join you? Lord Hokage said I should come get a look at my potential future students." Kakashi smiled as he figured out who it was, "Captain Yamato, of course you're welcome to join us." A shinobi in an ANBU Black Ops mask suddenly rose out of the ground, "Well thank you Kakashi. I'm glad someone recognized my voice. I only taught half of you."

Asuma and Kurenai smiled at their old teacher with slight embarrassment as he took off his mask and looked at them. Kakashi stepped forward, "Students, this is Captain Yamato Senju. He taught Asuma, Kurenai and me when we were C-rank Chunin and he's trained many more students besides, most of whom are Jonin now." "What do they have you teaching this time sensei?" Asuma asked. Yamato smiled, "Demolitions."

He turned to the assembled genin smiling, "And since apparently it's the modus operandi of the day, I'm going to try to scare the crap out of you all about it." His expression and face suddenly twisted so that his eyes looked like they would rip a person's soul out to eat and shadows fell strangely across his face, giving him an eerie, otherworldly look and earning flinches and cringes from several who could see it, "Who wants to blow stuff up?"

Naruto blinked and then raised his hand, Yamato's face suddenly returned to normal and he grinned, "See? Got one budding pyromaniac already! In Demolitions you learn how to maximize the destructive output of your jutsu to, as the name suggests, demolish enemy fortifications in as little time as possible. Since somebody's probably wondering why I'm qualified to teach you this, let me show you." He made a quick hand sign and the genin had just a second of ground rumble as warning of what was about to happen before massive wooden pillars exploded out of the ground and lifted them into the air, holding most of them dangling upside down. Yamato's face was suddenly ghoulisish again, "Any questions?"

"Can you put us down now?" Shikamaru asked. Yamato smiled, "I could, but I want to see how you'll get out of it." Naruto grinned at Hinata, who smiled back. An instant later there were suddenly two small explosions followed by Naruto and Hinata landing on the ground. Yamato looked up at the utterly demolished wooden restraints that had been holding them before turning back to them, "Was that what I think it was?" "Yep," Naruto replied with a grin. Yamato nodded, "Very impressive."

There was a sudden sound of wood breaking and Sakura flipped to the ground, dropping the torn pieces of her wooden restraints as she rose, Yamato stared, "You pulled those restraints apart with your bare hands? Those were strong enough to stop a charging bull!" Sakura shrugged with a smile, and Sasuke proudly put an arm around her, prompting Yamato to look up and stare again as he took in the scorch marks on the restraints that had been holding Sasuke, "That's some fire release! My Wood-style constructs are next to fire proof." Sasuke smiled slightly.

Choji was next down, having finally managed to expand enough to force his restraints the little bit open he needed to suck in his gut and squeeze out. Kiba was angrily trying to use Tunneling Fang only to find that he couldn't move enough to get his spin going, and Akamaru was just as stuck. Ino and Shikamaru weren't having any luck, neither were any of the others, except for Shino who was calmly waiting while

his insects ate the wood.

Yamato smiled up at the ones still caught in his Wood Release, "Well, I think I've seen what I needed to know." He made another hand sign and the wooden restraints lowered everyone back to the ground before fading away. Yamato turned to address those that had gotten down on their own, "I guess you five are the ones Lord Hokage said had potential for demolitions work. However, he said there were only three up for promotion this go round, so who's who?" Kakashi pointed to Naruto, Sakura and Hinata, "Naruto, Sakura and Hinata are up for promotion. Sasuke and Choji had rather difficult opponents during the preliminaries."

Sasuke immediately paled at the mention of his preliminary fight as Kakashi continued, "Naruto Sakura and Sasuke are from my squad, all three have strong potential for demolitions work although I think Sasuke might lean more towards anti-personnel. That's what I'll be training him for after this round of the exams, so I think he'll probably wind up specializing in that. Hinata is Kurenai's student, and I must say that surprised me just now," "Hinata's full of surprises," Kurenai supplied with a proud smile. "So it would seem," Kakashi replied before continuing, "And Choji is as you've probably guessed an Akimichi. He's been on Asuma's team."

Yamato nodded, "And who's team will he be on after the exams?" "Still mine," Asuma replied with a smile. "Wait a moment," Neji said suddenly, "What do you mean whose team will he be on after the exams? If he's not promoted won't he be on the same team he was on before?" Asuma looked at Kurenai, "Did I not tell 'em that?" "I don't think you spelled it out," Kurenai replied. Asuma sighed and turned back to the students, "Ok, I thought I made it clear earlier, but I'll spell it out for you. Chunin do not serve on the same teams as genin. Meaning your teams will potentially each be one or even two people short."

"We can't just throw in fresh recruits without running the risk of weighing down more advanced teams or throwing fresh out of the Academy genin into situations they're not ready for," Asuma continued, "So the teams will be restructured after the exams based upon who passes and who doesn't. We've already decided who among us will take which of you depending on how the dice fall." There was complete silence and then, "So who gets who?" Neji asked.

"Well Neji," Guy said, "Since you're the only one on my team who's not up for promotion, in the event Tenten and Lee both pass, and I have every confidence that they will, your training will be entrusted to my best friend and eternal rival Kakashi if either Naruto or Sakura pass. If Lee and Tenten fail then Team Guy will remain unchanged. If one does but the other does not, then we will take somebody from whichever squad has the fewest still in it. For example if Tenten, Lee, Shikamaru, Naruto, Sakura and Shino pass, but Hinata doesn't, then you and Hinata will be working under Kakashi while Kiba will move over to Team Asuma. Conversely if neither Hinata or Shino pass, but someone from our team does and Naruto and Sakura both do as well, then Sasuke will come over to Team Guy and Kurenai's team will remain unchanged. Trust me Neji we've worked it over from every possible angle and you won't be left in the lurch."

"And of course it's possible everyone up for promotion will pass," Yamato added helpfully, "In which case there will be five of you left

genin, not enough for two full squads, so a B-rank Chunin working on a Tactics and Command sub-specialty might be assigned to the squad that is one short to act as a tutor and secondary commander in the event your Jonin instructor is put out of commission. Don't worry, none of the teams will be weakened regardless of how the dice fall. Did that answer your question?"

Neji nodded, "Yes." Yamato smiled, "Well good, I'm glad we were able to get all that straightened out." He turned to the other Jonin, "Anything else that needs to be said?" Asuma shook his head, "Nope, I think that's everything."

End  
file.